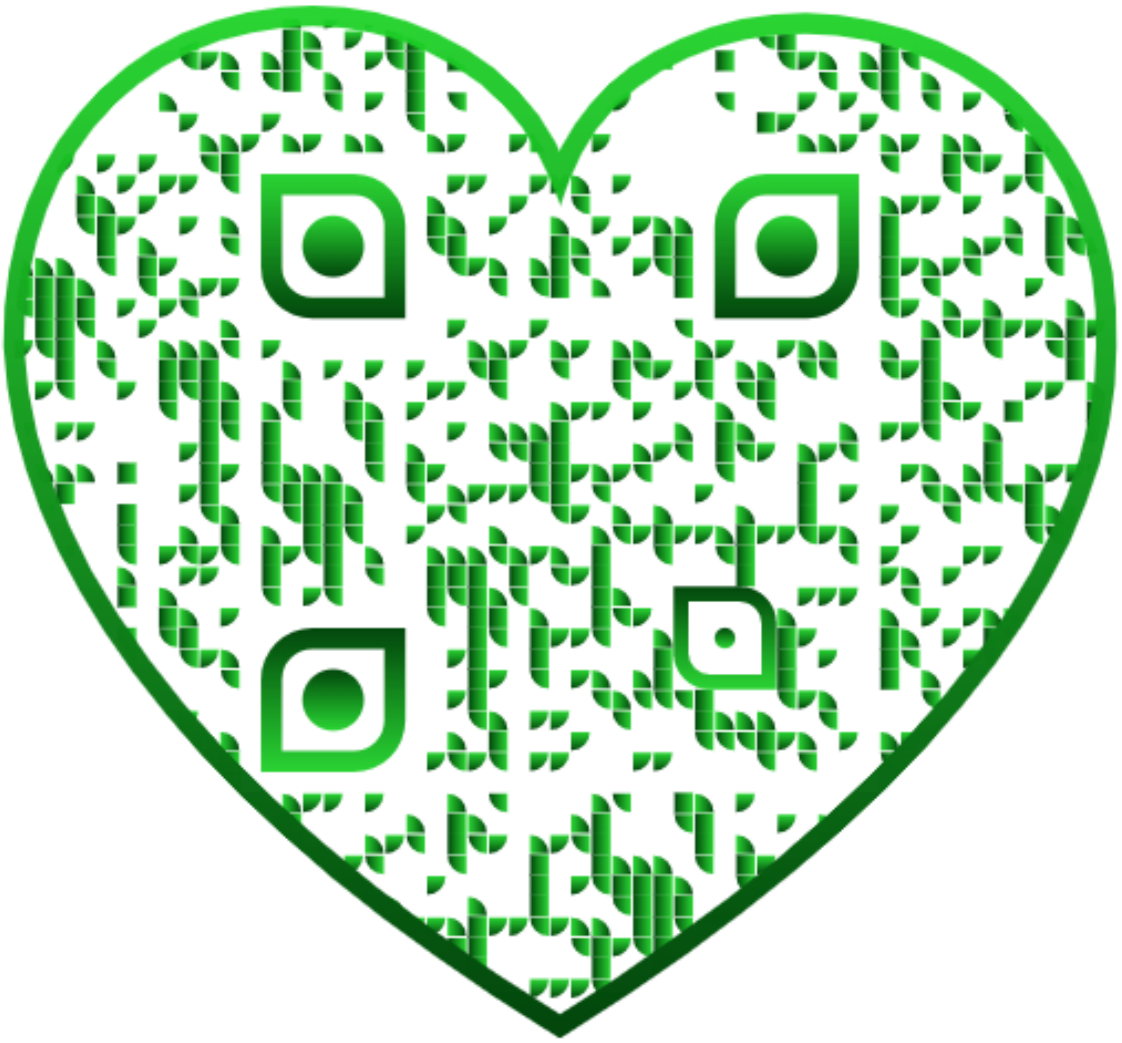
"Mesmerising and Scary" - Uri Geller

PARANORMAL INTRUDER

THE TRUE STORY OF A FAMILY IN FEAR

CAROLINE MITCHELL



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Praise for Paranormal Intruder

Caroline Mitchell's story of paranormal encounters in her own home is simply astonishing, mesmorising and scary. The fact Caroline had the bravery to expose and reveal this unusual phenomenon whilst still being a police officer is quite courageous. I highly recommend this extraordinary story.

Uri Geller
www.uri-geller.com

Caroline Mitchell reminds us that truth is indeed stranger than fiction, and events of extreme strangeness are rarely as well witnessed and well described as in this remarkable book.

Guy Lyon Playfair
Author of *This House is Haunted*

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Last and not least: For all those who have supported me, whose names I have failed to mention.

FOREWORD

I've been investigating the paranormal for over forty years. I've chased down giant eels in Switzerland, Bigfoot in Louisiana and mystery big cats in Northumberland. I've written over a dozen books and 2,000 articles, columns and features on the supernatural, as well as appearing in countless TV and radio shows. I say this not to brag, but merely to illustrate that I've been around the block not once, but several times, when it comes to paranormal research.

Have I witnessed preternatural phenomena myself? Yes I have, and I'm no longer courteous with the sceptics who dismiss them so blithely. They weren't there. And so they don't know.

Every now and then, one comes across a case which rises above all others. In 2006 I investigated the now-infamous South Shields Poltergeist case with my colleague Darren W. Ritson. The phenomena were so intense I recall saying to Darren, "We'll never get another case like this". I was wrong.

What you are about to read in this book is the truth about what I believe to be one of the worst cases of paranormal intrusion in recorded history. I'll go further than that, in fact, and state unequivocally that I know of no other of such intensity. When my colleague John F. Triplow and I first began our investigation, at the behest of the householders, we had no idea what we were letting ourselves in for. Our initial conclusion was that the family at the epicentre of the affair was being troubled by an extremely venomous poltergeist. But there were certain things which, we realised later, just didn't fit the typical poltergeist model. Every reader must draw their own conclusions about the nature of the entity which invaded that ordinary suburban dwelling, but there can be no doubt about its character and abilities.

The entity was – is – extremely malignant, highly dangerous and unsettlingly intelligent. I have seen fires light spontaneously and objects move, heard disembodied voices chattering out of the ether and received intimidating, threatening messages on my phone from this invisible creature. I have seen it manifest itself as the identical double of one of the witnesses – in view of myself and several others – and recorded it physically beating up one of the householders inside a motor car.

This entity is an expert in toying with humans. It has removed objects from the pockets of several people and placed them in the pockets of others without them noticing. It can make jokes and demonstrate a wry, dry sense of humour one minute, and the next create a sense of unbridled panic in those present.

The family at the centre of all this mayhem has coped phenomenally well, considering. Many others would have buckled at the knees and moved. They didn't. They decided to stay and fight. The strength of this case lies in the number of witnesses, including several police officers, and the sheer volume of incidents. To suggest that the whole affair was somehow stage-managed or hoaxed is patently ludicrous.

I know of no other case in history which rivals this one, and that is a very big statement to make indeed. However, I make this assertion because I've been there and witnessed its most horrible aspects with my own eyes. I know that this volume does not contain every incident – it would need several thousand pages to do that – but it presents the essence of this case very well. You will find this book disturbing. It is quite literally the nature of the beast I'm afraid, but you will also find it presents hope to those who are undergoing similar terrors. If this volume, written by eyewitnesses at the centre of the paranormal maelstrom, does not change the way you view the world then you are living in denial. If it wakens within you a belief that there is more to our world than that which we can see, and that not all of it is pleasant, then it will have served us well indeed.

Mike Hallowell
Author, columnist and freelance broadcaster

CHAPTER ONE

The First Call

The biggest question loomed in my mind like a dark cloud… *who is going to help us?* Emergency services were good for many things, but nothing of this nature. There was no point calling the police… I *was* the police – and a fat lot of good I was. Frustration bit into me. I faced tough things in my career and never backed down. Yet here I was, almost forty years of age, being frightened out of my home by something I could not even see.

The day had started off normally. Sitting at my computer in the rural police station, my fingers froze over the keyboard as my mobile phone vibrated in my pocket. My husband's name flashed up on the display. Neil rarely called me at work and I instinctively knew something was wrong. 'Hello?' I said.

Neil's voice came breathy and urgent. 'Caroline? Something's happening in the house, I think it's haunted.'

I struggled to comprehend him. 'What are you talking about? Are the kids OK?'

Neil's footsteps echoed against our wooden floor as he paced. 'Yeah they're fine. Lee is here with me. You won't believe what's been going on.'

I guessed Lee called around for a chat. Despite the ten-year age gap, Lee was a good friend to Neil, and they shared the same boyish sense of humour. I had a thought. *Are they playing a prank on me?* A call from my airwave radio requesting my attendance to an urgent incident drew my attention away.

'I'm sorry Neil, I can't talk right now. I'll call you back.' I ended the call and shoved the phone back into my pocket. The day flew as I raced from one incident to another. I returned to the station at the end of my shift and noticed

several missed calls from Neil on my phone. I frowned as I played back my voicemail. Neil's voice grew more panicked with each message, describing ghostly occurrences in our home. This was no joke. My priority was the children, who were with his parents in nearby Clacton. Neil was stepfather to two of our four children and I trusted him to keep them safe. But safe from what? We had been together for over ten years, and I knew him to be a solid and reliable man. His garbled messages left me dumbfounded. The station door creaked open as my colleague Stafford walked in.

'Right, that's me finished for the day,' he said, removing his hat. He ran his hands through his mop of silver hair and updated control that he was off duty.

'You're not going to believe this,' I said. 'Apparently my house is haunted.'

Stafford raised an eyebrow in my direction. 'Really? What's going on?'

'I don't know. Could you do me a favour and meet me at home? I know it sounds stupid, but if something's happening I'd like you to be there. I'll run the risk of getting sectioned if I come back and start telling people about this.'

'Sure mate that should be interesting,' Stafford said with a wry grin, his eyes twinkling in amusement.

I heaved a sigh of relief as I prepared to leave. Stafford was reasonably open-minded, and it would be good to have an independent witness present. I dumped my kit bag in my locker and walked outside to the front steps of the station. An empty beer can rattled across the street, carried by the cold wind. Zipping up my jacket, I lowered my head to avoid the bitter cold as I crossed the street to Neil, parked up in our car.

'What are you all doing here?' I said, surprised to see Neil's mother Valerie and his friend Lee in the car. I scooted into the back seat beside Lee, noticing his pale, drawn expression. Lee's long legs were tucked uncomfortably in front of him and he nodded in acknowledgement as he

gnawed on his thumbnail. I was tempted to say he looked as though he had seen a ghost, but thought better of it. Valerie turned her head from the front seat to greet me.

‘Nobody wanted to be left in the house,’ she said, with a hint of amusement on her lips.

‘Don’t worry, the children are safe at mine.’

Knowing the children were safe with their granddad helped me to relax and the journey home gave me time to think. I struggled to believe our house could be haunted. We lived in a new two-storey house in a rural village. What could be sinister about that? But Neil and Lee were unlikely to be scared easily. They worked in security and were not faint-hearted by any means. I dismissed the tangle of thoughts in my mind, deciding to wait and see for myself.

The car pulled into the drive, and I got out and stretched my legs. I glanced up at the red brick building we called home. Stafford was standing outside as promised, his broad figure casting a shadow in the fading sun. I unlocked the front door and walked into the hall cautiously. It was bright and airy, no different than usual. I opened the living room door on my right. *David’s toys were scattered on the floor where he left them in front of the fireplace that morning. For all of his four years, David was adept at making each room his own. Pausing in the doorway, my eyes darted around the room. Mustering up all my bravado, I strolled inside with a grin on my face.

‘C’mon then, where’s this ghost?’ My question was answered by a loud crack of smashing glass coming from the kitchen. ‘What was that?’ I yelped, my bravado melting away. Neil, Lee, Stafford and Valerie were standing in the living room with me. So who – or what – was in the kitchen? Walking through to our adjoined dining room, we made our way towards the kitchen. I tentatively opened the door to investigate the source of the noise. ‘Oh my God, look at all my cups,’ I cried to the empty room. It looked as if someone had been celebrating a Greek wedding in our kitchen. Pieces of crockery and

broken glass lay scattered all over our tiled floor.

‘You could have cleaned it up Neil,’ I said as he walked in behind me.

Neil rolled his eyes. ‘It was the least of my worries. Anyway, I left it there so you could see what happened.’ I realised how frightening it must have been at home that morning. Reality sunk in and I felt guilty for being so dismissive earlier in the day.

‘Oh. Sorry.’

Neil looked at me with an ‘I told you so’ expression. ‘Now do you believe me?’

I slid my arm around his waist to apologise. There was no way he would have caused so much damage as part of any strange prank.

‘Let’s get this mess sorted out,’ Valerie said, reaching for the sweeping brush. Without warning, a half empty cup flew off the table in the dining room and crashed against the wooden floor with a bang. Coffee dribbled down the oak floorboards, and shards of crockery glinted in the aftermath. I yelped as a giddy feeling of excitement and fright bubbled up inside me.

‘Oh my heart,’ I groaned, splaying my hands across my chest. It pounded through my shirt, and I took a couple of deep breaths to calm down.

‘Bloody hell that was loud, how did that happen?’ Stafford said.

‘I’m glad you’ve witnessed it,’ Neil said. He beckoned us from the dining room to the kitchen. ‘Now I want to show you something.’ He drew our attention to a large knife embedded in the lip of the kitchen drawer.

‘How did that end up there?’ I asked, searching his face for answers.

‘We found it like that. I wanted to leave it there so I could show you how bad it got.’

I felt the blood drain from my body. *What if David had walked in?* The room began to spin, and the air left my body quicker than I could breathe it in. I leaned against the worktop to steady myself.

‘The children,’ I said, my eyes pleading with Neil’s.

‘It’s OK love. I told you, the children are safe.’

‘And the dogs?’ We confined Lara our cocker spaniel and Lucy our bulldog to the garage to prevent them from walking on the debris.

‘They’re fine; nothing’s been directed towards them *or* the children.’

‘We need to put this away – it’s dangerous,’ I said. ‘Maybe we should take some pictures so we can show people, in case we need help.’ Neil took a camera from the kitchen drawer. He snapped the photo and put the offending knife away. Valerie and I began cleaning up the shattered crockery. ‘You know, this doesn’t look right. The glass is really smashed up. If I'd dropped one of these cups on the floor it wouldn’t have broken like this.’

Valerie nodded. ‘I know. I came down because Neil sounded upset on the phone. Everything he said really happened. Even while I was here, a fork went flying past my shoulder from thin air.’

I placed the broken glass into an empty cardboard box and sealed it up for the bin. ‘It’s so hard to believe. What’s causing it?’

Valerie shrugged her shoulders. ‘We don’t know.’

I had no reason to doubt my mother-in-law. She was the most sensible person I knew and had been like a mother to me since I moved here from Ireland. Despite being in her seventies, she was always there to lend a helping hand. Everything seemed so peculiar. A container of milk balanced eerily on the edge of the open microwave door. I took it down and put it in the fridge. We finished cleaning up and then returned to the living room. ‘What are we going to do now?’ I asked in hopeful anticipation that Neil had devised a plan in my absence. As he opened his mouth to speak, a dull *thud* came from the direction of the kitchen.

Neil raised his eyebrows. ‘Did you hear that?’

Lee jumped up from the sofa. ‘Let’s go and see what it is.’ Back we went to the kitchen. It was beginning to feel as though someone was playing a game with us.

A large bottle of bleach stood upright in the middle of the kitchen floor. ‘Wasn’t that on the counter a few minutes ago?’ I asked. I stared at the bottle,

trying to work out a rational explanation. Tapping my chin with my fingers, I mulled it over in my head. I was the last person to leave the kitchen, and everyone else was in the sitting room. I checked the windows and rattled the handle of the back door, which was locked. Even if the bottle had somehow managed to fall on the floor, it was unlikely to fall in an upright position, especially so far away from the counter. A shiver ran down my spine as the inconceivable became possible. Were we really experiencing the paranormal in our home? I ushered everyone back to the living room. 'Okay, let's all leave together and close the doors behind us to see if anything else happens.' My police training fell into play as I tried to investigate the source of the activity. Turning to leave, a forceful *thump* hit the floor behind us. Neil jumped with fright, and we ran out the door at the same time. It was almost comical.

Back in the safety of the living room, I caught my breath. 'God, what *was* that?'

Valerie was already heading back into the kitchen to find out. 'It's a tub of salt,' she said, matter of factly.

Ashamed for being so cowardly, I steeled myself to go back inside. *This screaming and running away business is getting embarrassing.* I returned to the kitchen and to see the large red tub of salt bleeding its contents on the floor.

Neil pointed upwards at the open cupboard door. 'It must have come out of here.'

Picking the red plastic salt tub up, I felt its weight while pondering the strength needed to disturb such a heavy item. 'We can't sleep here tonight, not with the children around.' I returned the salt to the cupboard and firmly closed the door. How would I explain these events to the children when I did not understand them myself?

Valerie was quick to reply. 'Don't worry; you're staying at our place tonight.'

I responded with a grateful smile and searched the kitchen drawers. There was never a pen when you needed one. ‘I think we should write down what’s happening, so we don’t forget.’ Stafford began to roll himself a cigarette. ‘What do you know about the history of the house?’

‘There is no history,’ Neil said. ‘We were the first ones to buy it. That’s what I don’t understand.’

Stafford could not offer any answer and simply shrugged. ‘Whatever it is, it’s pretty amazing.’ Neil pulled a bent up cigarette from his pocket and joined Lee and Stafford smoking at the open back door. He shifted from foot to foot as if ready to run at a moment’s notice. Neil was only a few inches taller than me, but years of swimming training afforded him a broad, muscular frame. He was not the nervous type. *Just what happened this morning?* A shiver ran through me. We slowly filtered back out into the living room. My mind worked overtime as a rational explanation eluded me. I did not suspect anyone of foul play, but I needed to be very clear there was no human intervention. I conducted a mental scan of the room and pulled the door closed. Further activity ensued, and I gave in to the conclusion that our house was well and truly haunted by a being of some sort. A very pissed off one at that. It wrecked my kitchen, throwing cup by cup, and when it ran out of crockery, it moved on to my saucepans. The novelty of the occurrences developed into a sick nervousness in the pit of my stomach. An almighty smashing noise filled the air as I entered the kitchen to investigate the latest occurrence. Shards of glass shattered on the kitchen floor and I jumped back to avoid them.

Neil picked up what was left of the saucepan lid. All that remained was the metal trimming which had once encircled it. I cautiously walked over and examined it.

‘This is really bad Neil. I’ve dropped this saucepan lid in the past and it’s never smashed like this. We need help.’ Closing my eyes, I rubbed the middle of my forehead, wishing some answers would appear.

Valerie's soft voice interrupted my thoughts, 'Who are you going to call?'

I refrained from answering 'Ghostbusters'. Now was not the time for humour, and I was pretty shaken up by the day's events. Perhaps the Internet would be of use. 'I'm going to get my laptop and see if I can find help.' Biting my lip, I hesitated. 'Will someone come with me please?'

Neil slouched in resignation, rubbing the back of his shaven head. 'Yeah, let's all sit down. I'm tired.'

I scratched the waistband of my itchy black trousers. It was usually a relief to change out of my uniform, but being all alone in my bedroom did not appeal to me. I also needed to use the toilet, but wild horses would not drag me into the solitary confinement of our bathroom.

Back in the living room with my laptop powered up, I wasn't sure where to begin. My hands shook with adrenalin as I typed, *help*, *haunted house* and found theme parks, news stories and pay as you go psychic readings. I tried again with *help*, *ghost*, but nothing of use was returned to me. Telephoning the local Spiritualist Church, my frustration mounted with every unanswered ring. I hung up the phone and quickly tapped in a request for local mediums and paranormal investigators on my laptop. After several pages of searching, I found a phone number and dialled it, praying they would offer help. A female voice answered and I blurted out our problems. 'Um hello, I'm wondering if you can help me. I think our house is haunted. Things are being thrown and we need help. I'm a genuine person, this isn't a prank.'

The woman on the other end paused for breath and replied 'Sorry? This is a leisure centre.'

Heat rose from my collar as my face flushed in embarrassment. 'Oh sorry,' I garbled, and hung up. *Bloody hell, she must have thought I was crazy. How the hell did I get through to a leisure centre?* Looking down at my shaking hands, I realised I had dialled the wrong number. I picked up the phone to try again, but static blared down the line. I turned to Stafford. 'The bloody phone isn't working. I'll put it on speaker, listen to this.'

Stafford sat in the chair rolling another cigarette. I pressed the speaker button and static noise reverberated throughout the room. ‘Hmm, that’s strange. Keep trying,’ he said.

I made several more attempts, but all I got was static. I threw the phone down in exasperation and rested my head in my hands. I was trapped in the worst kind of nightmare.

CHAPTER TWO

Help, Please

I pulled my blonde strands of hair loose from the constraints of the ponytail, shaking it free with my fingers. One of my best qualities was being reliable during emergencies. For someone who usually had all the answers, I was astounded by my inability to cope. I looked at Stafford sitting across from me. Ten years my senior, he had a knack of being able to connect with people of all ages. With his easy-going nature and positive attitude, it was easy to like him. ‘Normally I would offer you a cup of tea, but… we seem to be out of cups,’ I joked.

Stafford grinned in response. ‘Don’t worry, I think I can manage without one.’

Lee yelped from upstairs and came galloping down with Neil close behind him. ‘You’re not going to believe this,’ he said, ‘I was on the landing when a plate flew out of *Sarah’s room and nearly hit me on the head.’

Sarah was my fifteen-year-old daughter, with a typical teenager’s bedroom to match. I recalled telling her on many occasions that if she did not pick up her dirty clothes, they would walk to the wash basket by themselves. I had not counted on dinner plates taking on a life of their own as well.

Neil fiddled in his jeans pocket for his lighter. I wished he would not smoke so much, but I made an allowance in the hope it might calm his nerves. ‘I was in Joe’s room when I heard it hit the ground. It’s still on the landing upstairs.’

The thought of anything untoward being in my daughter’s room made my skin creep. I climbed the stairs cautiously, my hand sliding up the banisters

for support. Pausing halfway up, I spotted the plate on the top landing, several inches away from the step. A cold sensation overcame me and I shuddered. Promptly, I turned and walked back downstairs, rubbing my arms to warm them. ‘I'm not going up there by myself,’ I mumbled while walking into the living room. Neil was not listening; he was on the phone to his brother Mark, providing him with updates. I gathered from their conversation that Mark was leaving from his home in London to see what was going on. I was not surprised. As identical twins, Neil and Mark had a close bond. Come hell or high water, nothing would stop Mark from being there for his twin.

A soft thudding noise came from the hall and Neil walked out to investigate. ‘Caroline, did you move the picture?’

‘Oh, what now?’ I groaned, following him into the hall. Our large family pictures had been disturbed. One of them now lay on the ground, placed on its side against the wall. I looked closely at where the picture had previously been hanging. ‘I haven’t touched it… but look at the hook.’ I pointed at the mangled piece of metal on the wall. Not only was it mangled out of shape, it was upside down too. The picture was heavy and if it had just been removed from the wall it would surely have fallen and smashed on the floor. Somehow, the picture had been gently placed on its side. But why was the hook bent out of shape?

Neil stared at the hook. ‘I wonder if the neighbours have experienced anything similar.’

‘Who knows,’ I replied. ‘It’s not something you can drop into general conversation is it?’ We lived in a small close and kept to ourselves. Although I was curious, I did not feel the need to carry out a neighbourhood survey on ghostly occurrences. We turned to go back into the living room, and heard a soft tap as something lightly hit the ground.

Neil froze. ‘Did you hear that? It’s David’s shoe. I’m sure it was in the hall a second ago.’ He pointed through the open kitchen door at the shoe, which was now on its side in the middle of the floor.

‘Check the camera Neil, see if you’ve captured anything,’ I said.

Neil turned on the camera and it offered up the last stored photos. ‘You’re right. The shoes had both been in the hall just seconds earlier. One of them must have been thrown from the hall through the open kitchen door.’ As I walked away, Neil whispered in disbelief, ‘I’ve just seen David's shoe flip upright.’ Sure enough, it had. Neil was about ten feet away from the other shoe, which was now upright on the kitchen floor. He took another photo and marvelled that he had seen it move with his own eyes.

The dogs watched me through the stair gate in their doorway, their ears pricked. *What must they make of all this commotion?* I opened the garage door and watched as they padded out into the garden, sniffing the air. I wondered if I was frightened unnecessarily. Maybe we just needed to get a medium to visit and he could tell it to ‘go to the light’. At least, that’s what happened on the TV. But why start now? Was it something we did? I shook my head. The very thought of a ghost in our home seemed ridiculous. Yet I had seen and heard the chaos and could not come up with a rational explanation.

The barking dogs signalled my son *Joe’s return from college. We explained the occurrences as best we could to him. At seventeen, he was mature enough to handle the truth, but I had no intention of telling our other three children, and warned him to keep it to himself. Joe handled the news with his usual grace and accepted it without question.

The barrage of activity was relentless. Neil’s coat, which had earlier been hanging in the hall, was found spread out on the floor. As we tried to decipher the meaning behind the coat being moved, we discovered something else. The front door keys had been taken out of the door and placed on a bicycle in the hall. I rubbed my eyes. It had been a long day and I was getting tired.

Neil and Lee searched for cups in the kitchen to make coffee with while I sat with Stafford, Joe and Valerie in the lounge. Searching for help on my

laptop, I e-mailed some mediums, giving them an outline of the day's events. I dialled out on the house phone only to hear static hiss down the receiver. I took out my mobile and fiddled with the touch screen. 'I'm all fingers and thumbs, I can't get it to work,' I groaned. I did not like the touch screen at the best of times, but today my fingers felt like bananas. 'I would feel so much better if I knew help was coming.' An eerie *thump, thump* noise emanated from the hall. Stafford and I both looked at each other, and then got up to investigate. We could not believe our eyes.

'Will you look at that?' Stafford said. The plate, which had been on the top landing, was now coming quickly down the stairs all by itself; *thump… thump… thump* as it struck each step. It got to the bottom step and landed on the ground without breaking.

I froze as I stared at the plate near my feet. 'Bloody hell, nobody is going to believe me at work tomorrow.'

Stafford picked up the plate and examined it, turning it over in his hand. 'Mad isn't it? But don't worry, I'll tell anyone that asks what I've seen tonight.'

I was struck by a thought. *I wonder if I can catch anything on tape?* I took the camcorder out of the cupboard. Sitting down, I fiddled with the switches. I turned the camcorder on. It promptly turned itself off again. I frowned. I recently filmed the children and knew the battery was charged. I tried again and it switched off. 'What's going on with this camera?' I huffed. The warning message 'lens cap on' flickered on the display. The lens cap was hanging down by the side. After a few frustrating minutes, the camcorder powered into life. I pressed the record button. We sat in silence, waiting for something to happen. After twenty minutes I turned the camcorder off. 'Hmm, looks like it has stopped.'

Stafford got up and stretched. 'Well I've been here hours now. Better get home or the missus will be wondering where I've got to.'

Neil held his hand out, 'Thanks for coming, we really appreciate it.'

Stafford firmly shook Neil's hand. 'No mate, I'm privileged. I've seen some things in my time, but nothing like that. That's a story for the grandkids one day.' Neil waved Stafford off as he walked down the drive.

I began to climb our flight of stairs when a loud thumping noise stopped me dead in my tracks. *Bang.* A door slammed loudly. 'What the hell is that?' I shouted, back tracking. Apart from the bathrooms, the upstairs was carpeted and the doors did not close by themselves. There were no open windows or breezes that would have caused it to happen, and the dogs were downstairs. I clenched my hands into fists. It was getting dark and I needed to pack an overnight bag for the children. I looked up the stairs at the dark shadows cast by the diminished light. Something menacing was waiting for me. My stomach clenched at the thought of going up there alone.

Neil watched me hesitate and climbed the stairs to accompany me. Joe followed us up to the room that he shared with David to pack some games and clothes.

My mind racing, I entered my bedroom and hastily shoved some clothes into a holdall. I walked out to the airing cupboard on the landing to get some clean towels. I was used to having to pull the door open by force over the thick cream carpet. I dragged the door open and took what was necessary. Balancing the towels and a bag, I grabbed the handle to close it. *Bang.* The door slammed closed with considerable force, yanking my arm forward. I took a step backwards, astonished. *Did something just pull the door closed from the inside?* My hand hovered over the handle to try it again. Inhaling deeply, I opened and closed the door. It slowly dragged over the carpet. I gathered the rest of our things with a sense of urgency, trying to suppress the panic in my voice, 'Neil, Joe, I'm ready to go. I'll meet you both downstairs.'

Joe joined me in the hall, his face ashen. 'What's wrong?' I said, impatient and ready to leave.

He spoke slowly, staring at the ground. 'I was walking down the stairs and I felt someone shove me from behind. I had to grab the banisters to stop

myself from falling down.'

I gave his shoulder a quick squeeze. 'It's okay, we're leaving now,' I said, wanting to get him out to the car as quickly as possible. It was dark outside and our house grew more ominous by the minute. Joe got in the car, and Neil called me aside.

'I didn't want to say anything in front of Joe, but after he left I heard a noise in his bedroom. I looked inside and saw a toy soldier rolling across the floor by itself.'

'Right that's it, let's get the hell out of here,' I said, not wanting to hear any more. We settled the dogs and drove five miles to Neil's parents' flat, which was situated on the seafront in Clacton-on-Sea. I felt a pang of regret at leaving the dogs behind, but we had no choice. My in-laws flat had a strict 'no pets' policy. The dogs had a warm haven in our garage, which was converted into a comfortable living space for them. It was fine for the short term and Neil promised to check on them later.

We arrived in Clacton and pulled into a vacant space outside his parents' luxury flats. The impressive stone building had been built in Victorian times and kept many of its original period features. I pressed the buzzer, waiting to be allowed in. The door clicked its release and we walked into the large communal hall, our footsteps echoing on the faded red tiles. A thick dark wooden staircase spiralled up four floors. It had an ethereal quality and my voice echoed upwards as I spoke. 'If this building was haunted I would understand,' I said, imagining the ghosts of Victorian ladies floating gracefully down the stairs in their finery.

'I know,' Neil said, as he pressed the button on the lift. 'I don't know why it's picked our house all of a sudden.'

'Mummy! 'David shouted, running towards me as I reached the front door, his arms open wide to greet me. I kneeled and hugged him tightly, kissing his floppy blonde hair. 'We're staying here tonight,' he said.

'Yes I know, good isn't it?'

‘Did you buy me anything?’ he asked, his dimples melting my heart.

‘Sorry sweetheart, I’ve been at work all day. Maybe next time.’

He frowned. ‘Will you read me a story then?’

‘Of course, let’s get you ready for bed.’ Taking him by the hand, we walked into the small spare bedroom. *Alice, our eight year old, followed us inside. I patted the top of her head. She was growing so fast and was full of chatter and questions. Sarah, my fifteen-year-old daughter, climbed into her navy blue sleeping bag on the ground. The excitement of the day sent David into a fitful sleep. I picked up the children’s discarded clothes from the floor and began folding them. Alice and Sarah sat up, unhappy that they were being kept in the dark about the day’s events.

‘What is it, Mum? We know something is going on.’ Sarah’s wavy dark hair and pale skin played a perfect backdrop to her brooding scowl.

I squeezed their clothes into an already packed drawer. They were not going to let this drop easily. ‘OK, something *has* happened in the house. We don’t want to take any chances so we’re going to stay here until we can find out what it is.’

Alice twiddled with her long brown plaits, looking puzzled. ‘Is it a ghost then?’

I sat on the bed and sighed. *How on earth do I approach the subject of ghosts to a child?* I recalled Neil telling me the children were at home for part of the day, and although he removed them as quickly as he could, they had already seen far too much.

‘Look. As far as I know, this could be a spirit of some kind that is playing up. But, I don’t think that it’s able to cause us harm,’ I paused. ‘At least you know, no matter what happens, there *is* life after death and that’s a very good thing indeed.’ I nodded to Joe who had crept in, and was resting on his elbow in his sleeping bag on the ground. He nodded in return, understanding the silent gesture. I knew I could trust him not to frighten the others, and got up to leave before they asked any more awkward questions. I opened the small

bedroom window, hoping the sound of the sea would lull them into a deep sleep. Joe and Sarah slept on the floor, while David and Alice shared the bed. It was not ideal, but at least they were safe. I changed out of my uniform into a mismatched top and jogging bottoms, and joined Neil's parents in the living room. Neil had already left with his brother Mark to check on the dogs. Mark had driven from London just to be there, and I guessed he wanted to witness the activity for himself. Half an hour later the buzzer system activated to signal his return. I was surprised to see Mark accompanied by his two teenage daughters, *Lily and *Kathy. 'You didn't allow the girls inside the house did you?' I asked Neil.

'No, we stayed outside while Mark went in with Lee to check on the dogs.'

'Were they OK?'

'Oh the dogs are fine,' Neil replied with a grin. 'Nothing seemed to happen in the house while we were gone.'

'What are you grinning at?' I said, puzzled by his expression.

Neil leaned forward to whisper. 'Mark and Lee looked in on the dogs and then went to the kitchen to check it out. A cup smashed to the ground and frightened the absolute crap out of them. You should've seen the speed they both ran out the front door,' he chuckled.

CHAPTER THREE

Recall

I wandered into the kitchen feeling exhausted. Neil and Mark puffed on their cigarettes; the exhaled smoke curled from their lips through the open window. Fighting the urge to join them, I distracted myself by helping Valerie make tea. We planned to sit down together to discuss the day's events. Neil's father Ben retired to his bedroom to watch his portable television. He was worried about his son, but did not want to hear any more upsetting details.

Valerie nodded towards the bowl of sugar on the top shelf of the cupboard. 'Can you get that down for me please?'

I smiled, happy to oblige. Valerie's hands were swollen from regular steroid treatments for her arthritis, and lifting anything heavy was difficult. I admired her tenacity. Doctors advised her she would be wheelchair bound years ago, but she refused to give in. Valerie brought the steaming cups of tea to the living room, and we followed her in. I perched on the sofa beside Neil with my cup of tea in hand.

Mark stared expectantly, waiting for Neil to recall the story in full. 'So tell us then, how did it all begin?'

Neil cleared his throat. 'I was watching a paranormal programme on television with Lee when the postman knocked on the door. I answered, and then checked on David who was playing upstairs on his computer game. When I went downstairs, the remote control had disappeared from the arm of the sofa. I asked Lee if he'd seen it, and he said he hadn't.'

I smiled, knowing just how precious the TV remote control was to my

television addict husband.

‘We both spent about five minutes looking for the remote, under the sofas, and even pulled out all the cushions. After a while, we gave up looking and went out to the back garden for a cigarette. I joked with Lee that perhaps a ghost had moved it. A few minutes later, we walked back into the living room and I noticed my car keys on the step aerobics box on the floor.’ Neil stopped to take a swig of his tea.

I glanced at Mark and Valerie. They were rapt, hanging on his every word. Neil put his cup down and continued with his story.

‘Lee was surprised by the keys being moved and joked that whatever moved them should do it again. I knew he didn’t believe anything paranormal had happened, but neither of us could explain it. I played along for the laugh, and we went back into the kitchen for a coffee. David was still upstairs playing his game. When we returned to the living room, the keys *had* moved, from the step box to the fireplace. We started feeling a bit uneasy, although we still didn’t know what it was.’

My thoughts turned to David. The idea of him being alone upstairs while something prowled in our home was a feeling too horrible to contemplate. I swallowed back the tightness in my throat. ‘What about David, did you check on him?’

‘Yes, I was coming to that bit,’ Neil said. ‘I turned off the television and checked on David to see he was fine. Then I went downstairs and followed Lee into the kitchen. He pointed to some furniture polish in the middle of the floor and asked me if I put it there. I told him I hadn’t touched a thing. Lee was getting really nervous by now, and said he wanted to leave. I told him to wait as I would get David and go with him.’ Neil frowned as the story unfolded. ‘The phone rang and I looked at the display. Instead of giving the caller’s number, it just said call. I answered to hear a strange echoing sound. I put the phone on speaker and Lee said we should ask it to tap three times if it was a ghost.’

‘I thought he was trying to leave,’ I interrupted.

‘Lee was just trying to understand what it was. Anyway, just as he said it, three tapping noises came from down the phone. It was weird, like someone was tapping on the outside handset with a long fingernail. We both freaked out when it did this, as we were convinced it was paranormal.’ Neil paused as his eyes met mine. ‘I tried calling you on the phone but you said you weren’t able to talk to me.’

I nursed the mug in my hands, taking comfort in the warmth.’ I was working Neil, and had I known, would have come.’

Neil gave my knee a squeeze and continued, ‘Lee shouted he was leaving and I told him I would get David and go with him. Lee went to lock the back door in the kitchen. As I came downstairs with David, we both heard a weird noise coming from inside the living room, like something being dragged across the floor. We slowly opened the door, not knowing what to expect. The step box was propped up against the wall on its side. I didn’t want to frighten David as he didn’t know what was going on. I had him in my arms at this stage, and we just wanted to get out. The problem was that we didn’t have a car as Caroline had taken it to work.’

Valerie nodded as she sat forward in her seat, concern etched on her face.

Neil continued, ‘We decided to get a bus to pick up the car. As I went to the front door to leave, I noticed David’s glove was placed on the door handle. It had been drying on the radiator in the hall before that, and I knew someone had moved it. I didn’t like it touching David’s things, although I still didn’t know what *it* was. We picked up the car and brought David back to Mum’s. Later I went back home to check on the dogs with Lee. The house phone rang from inside the house as we walked up to it. I answered the phone, but there was nobody there. I got this horrible feeling, like someone was watching us. We were really shook up to see the knife embedded in the kitchen drawer.’

I shuddered. Cups smashing were one thing, but knives suggested an evil

intent. I did not want to think about the consequences had it been thrown in their direction. I stared out through the large bay windows overlooking the sea, reflecting the glow of the winter moonlight. Time stood still as I sank deeper into thought, contemplating the implications for our family. My focus returned to Neil, who was rubbing his eyes in tiredness.

He stifled a yawn and carried on with the rest of the story. ‘The microwave door was halfway open and a carton of milk was balanced on the top edge. That’s when Mark called me. I had been ringing him on and off all day. When I mentioned the knife, he told us to get out of the house as we could be in serious danger. He thought it was demonic.’ The room fell silent as Neil paused for breath. ‘Leaving seemed like the sensible thing to do, so we put the dogs to bed. The next thing, a loud growling noise came from upstairs. It didn’t sound human, and it frightened the hell out of us. I don’t know why but…’ Neil’s voice drifted away, as he recalled what happened next.

I was gripped by now. ‘Carry on, what don’t you know?’

‘It seems daft now,’ Neil said, ‘but Lee armed himself with a roll of tinfoil from the kitchen and we both crept back into the hall.’

I sniggered. ‘Tinfoil? What was he going to do with that?’

Neil smiled. He could laugh about it now, but I imagined it was not funny at the time. ‘Lee was in front of me and he looked upstairs. Whatever he seen frightened him enough for him to drop the tinfoil and start shouting at me to get out. He was screaming, “Get out, I’ve seen it.” We both barged our way out of the front door together. I still had the home phone in my hand and managed to lock the door. As I walked away from the house, the phone rang. I looked at the display and again, it didn’t say where the call came from. I was shaking so much by now, I didn’t answer.’

Nobody spoke as he placed his empty cup on the coffee table. ‘Just then I felt a burning sensation on the back of my neck. It stung, as though something had just cut me, so I asked Lee to take a look. Lee freaked out as he said there were three bad scratches on the back of my neck that were

starting to bleed. The cuts were razor sharp – see?' Neil rolled down his collar to reveal three long scratches on the back of his neck.

'Oh my God.' I raised my hand to my mouth. These were no accident. It was not possible for Neil or Lee to have caused the injury as they both bit their fingernails to the quick.

Neil rolled his collar back up. 'I could hardly breathe by now. My heart was pounding so hard, I felt like I was going to have a heart attack. After I calmed down, I picked Alice up from school. We had to wait for Sarah to walk home as she was taking a shortcut with friends. The more I thought about what was happening in the house, the more annoyed I got. I sat there thinking, how dare this thing drive me out of my home. I told Alice to stay in the car and keep an eye out for Sarah while I went back inside. I told Lee it was time to face this thing and send it packing,' Neil said, his forehead creasing from the memory of his frustration.

I placed my hand on his. This was more like the man I knew. He would never give up without a fight.

'As we walked towards the house, the home phone started ringing. It was still in my pocket from earlier on. I opened the door and walked inside, answering the phone. It was the same echoing noise that I heard earlier and I was really angry by now. I started swearing and shouting down the phone, calling it all sorts of names. Then I shouted, 'Come on then, fucking show yourself,' down the phone. Then – there was the most frightening sound I've ever heard.' Neil's voice lowered as he stared at the floor, his discomfort obvious. 'It was very loud, a deep growling sound, and it sounded pure evil. I dropped the phone and shouted at Lee to get out.'

My stomach twisted into knots as I imagined the horrors Neil had been through in our home. Valerie looked equally uncomfortable and exhaled softly. Mark quickly checked on his daughters, who were in their sleeping bags in the hall. When he returned, Neil continued with the story.

'My legs were shaking so much; they felt like rubber bands. Sarah had

arrived home by now and was walking inside asking everyone what was going on. I pushed her outside and told her that she couldn't go in. Slamming the door behind me, I got Sarah into the car. I tried to start the engine, but my legs were shaking so hard I couldn't work the pedals. Sarah kept shouting, asking me what was wrong. Lee told her to calm down as we would explain it all later. He asked me what I heard on the phone, but I didn't want to say anything in front of the kids. I took a few deep breaths and tried to pull myself together. After that, we came back to Mum's place. I told her things were really bad in the house, and she wanted to see it for herself.'

I shook my head in disbelief. 'No wonder you were so shaken when you called. What happened next?'

'At half four we went back to the house as I had to pick you up at five. Lee was still with us as he was worried about going home on his own. The three of us went inside. We checked on the dogs and I showed Mum into the kitchen. Just then, a fork shot through the air over our shoulders. All three of us had our backs turned to the cutlery drawer. I wanted to leave, but Mum was really calm and told me to stay where I was. We decided to stay together. A loud smash came from the kitchen as a wine glass smashed on the floor. Cups and glasses were thrown too. Every time we turned our backs something was thrown and smashed. Not long after that, we picked you up from work. You know the rest,' Neil said, stretching his weary limbs.

I nodded, with a better understanding of why everyone was present in the car when Neil picked me up. 'Maybe it was just a one off and that's the end of it,' I said, trying to be optimistic. Little did I know my optimism would be severely tested during the months that lay ahead.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Glimmer of Hope

February 2010

I awoke to the unfamiliar sounds of seagulls screaming in the morning sun. Memories of the previous day flooded into my consciousness, and I lay back into my pillow, trying to process them. The sofa bed in the living room was cramped, but we were grateful for it. Neil stirred, and we both lay in silence, neither one of us wanting to face the day ahead. We returned home after breakfast and scoped the house while the children waited in the car. Neil checked upstairs while I attended to the dogs. I crouched down to receive their wet kisses as their tails wagged in appreciation. Everything appeared normal, apart from the jagged broken cup on the floor from the night before. Neil joined me, satisfied that for now, we were safe.

'Are you sure you'll be OK here alone?' he said.

I smiled, touched by his concern. 'Yes. Now go, I need to get ready for work.' His strong arms wrapped around me, and I relaxed into his embrace. 'You go ahead; any problems and I will leave.'

'OK then, I'll be back as soon as I've dropped the kids off to school,' Neil replied, eyeing me warily before making his way out the front door.

I picked up the remnants of the smashed cup and allowed the dogs into the garden to play. Cleaning up any evidence of the night before, I gave the worktops one last spray and wiped down the tiles. The smell of lemons lifted my mood and the house seemed much less threatening in the soft morning light. I climbed the stairs to our bedroom to get changed. Buttoning up my

crisp white shirt, I wondered if we would get any sleep that night. I could not envisage allowing our children to sleep in different rooms. An idea floated into my head. I walked to their rooms and dragged two single mattresses out. Placing them side-by-side at the end of the bed, I worked out that Sarah and Alice could share, Joe could have a mattress of his own, and David could sleep with us. Smiling in satisfaction, I admired the made up beds. *They may not be thrilled about it, but at least I can keep an eye on them.* The familiar rumble of our car caught my attention. I grabbed my warrant card from the bedside table and sighed, it was time for work and I could not afford to be late. I passed Neil in the hall, holding David in his arms. 'Call me if you need me,' I said, giving them both a kiss on the cheek.

David wrapped his small hands around my neck, giving it a tight squeeze. 'Mummy, I don't want you to go,' he said.

I drew back slowly, taking his hands in mine. 'I have to work sweetheart, so I can make money to buy you nice things.'

David nodded and wriggled to be let down to play. It was a conversation we'd had many times before, and my heart ached to stay at home with my young son. I consoled myself he was safe with Neil, who worked flexible hours to look after him.

Work was busy. I checked my phone numerous times and was relieved there had been no calls. I would not let my husband down a second time. A look of relief crossed Neil's face when I arrived home, although he explained the day passed without event. I inspected our kitchen, which was as I left it. The black worktops were still gleaming from that morning, and the cutlery safely put away in the drawer. The ring of our telephone jolted me from my thoughts, causing me to relive the disturbing calls of the previous night.

Neil had a quick conversation with his mother and joined me in the kitchen. 'It's the fourth time she's called me today,' he said with a hint of embarrassment.

I was grateful for their support; it must have been hard for Neil staying in

the house all day. The children stayed upstairs as Neil and I cooked a roast chicken for dinner. I chopped vegetables with the same knife that was jammed in the kitchen cupboard just twenty-four hours earlier. ‘You know, I don’t understand why this all started up, out of the blue. It’s not as if we just moved in. If someone’s unhappy about us being here, why wait until now?’

‘I know, it makes no sense,’ Neil said, placing a saucepan of water on the stove.

‘I can’t help wondering if it’s something you or Lee started in the house? I mean, were you dabbling in the Supernatural for a joke or something, did you use an Ouija board?’ I asked, trying to be tactful while mercilessly chopping the carrots.

‘No, of course not,’ he said in a tone which suggested he did not like being accused of encouraging such mayhem. ‘The only time I’ve ever used them was when I was a kid. I’d never bring anything like that into the house.’

‘I’m not blaming you, Neil, just trying to understand why it started up. Do you think it could have been anything to do with that ghost programme you were watching on TV?’

‘There must be thousands of viewers watching that, they can’t all be haunted as a result.’

It was a fair point. ‘OK, but we won’t be watching them in future.’ I looked down at the carrots, which were in tiny pieces. Plopping them into the bubbling water, I hoped the children would not notice my over zealous chopping. I turned to Neil, curious. ‘So tell me what happened when you were young.’

Neil gave a crooked smile, recalling his youth. ‘I used to meet with my friends and use an Ouija board for a laugh. One night we all met in the bottom of the garden shed and brought the board. We lit some candles and locked the shed door from the inside. We sat around the board asking questions as we usually did. We all had our fingers on the glass, and it was really moving back and forth. Someone asked a question. The glass shot

across the board and smashed on the floor. We all jumped up as a cold breeze blew over us, extinguishing the candles at the same time. We began yelling we wanted to get out, but in all the panic someone dropped the door key. We were trapped. The door was locked, and everyone was screaming. We got the fright of our lives. That was the last time we played with an Ouija board.'

I was entertained by the story, but it raised more questions than it answered. Could Neil's past dabbling in the supernatural be connected with the problems in our home? I treated the situation the same way I would any investigation. Find the source of the incident then deal with it. It worked fine with flesh and blood people but was not so easy when dealing with the paranormal. We went over other unusual events that occurred in our lives throughout the years. Neil explained when he was in his twenties, he worked as a manager of a leisure centre. One night he was locking up after everyone left. When the lights went out, a cold breeze came over him as a child's voice whispered his name. He turned around and saw a little girl in Victorian clothing standing there, staring at him. She had an unearthly appearance. Neil panicked and ran out of the building as the vision of the little girl disappeared. He later spoke to his work colleagues about his experience. Apparently, the sighting of the little girl was not uncommon, and he was not the first person to report it.

Later in life he had other strange experiences, but closed himself off to them as he was uncomfortable with the feeling they brought. When he was twenty-eight, he moved to Ireland to work for his family business, and that is where we met. After five years together in Ireland, we had Alice and moved to England along with Joe and Sarah, my two children from my first marriage. It was a big step for us, but a welcome one as I looked forward to starting a new life overseas. We rented a house in Clacton on Sea. It was near Neil's parents, who moved there after retiring. Strange incidents occurred in our rented house. A spare downstairs room remained freezing cold while the rest of the house was warm. Our normally placid dog often stood at the door

of the room looking inside, barking at thin air with her hackles up. Whispers woke me from my sleep, but when I checked, there was nobody there. Footsteps echoed up and down the stairs. I got out of bed to scold the children, only to discover they were all sound asleep. I made enquiries and found the previous tenants. They told me an elderly woman used to live there and had died in her sleep in that downstairs room. I did not know how to react at the time. I had never encountered anything paranormal in my life until then. Neil took it in his stride.

One day I walked into the downstairs room. Feeling a little foolish, I said we were sorry if we upset anyone and were not staying there very long. A few days afterwards the room temperature was normal, and the dog never barked at it again. Whatever I had said seemed to work.

This sparked an interest in all things spiritual. Neil and I were both Catholics and our religion frowned on dabbling in the paranormal. However, my curiosity was spiked and I attended a Spiritualist church a few times out of interest. Eventually I stopped going. Life was busy, and we settled back into a normal routine.

After renting for a couple of years, we were keen to buy a new house, and found a proposal for new builds. Set in a quiet rural village, it seemed idyllic. We viewed the plans of the house and instantly fell in love with it. Its four bedrooms and three bathrooms were ideal for our growing family and I loved the prospects of living near the beach. By the time we were in a position to buy, the house was built and we put an offer in. We moved in that summer and a few months later David was born. It was perfect. Our family was complete, and we were happy.

It was several years before anything strange occurred. I enjoyed working in the Police, which was varied and interesting. The older children were settled in school and David was due to start the following year. Neil got a job in security with Lee and met his friend Chris at a local pub.

Overall, the house felt peaceful, but as time went on, Neil felt very low. He

could not explain it, but sometimes he felt depressed for no reason, which was so unlike him.

Keys were sometimes found in strange places and things went missing, but we put it down to our memory playing tricks on us. Looking back, I wondered if it had been a sign of things to come.

The buzzing of the oven timer brought me abruptly back into reality. I dismissed thoughts of the past, knowing the answers did not lie in the recesses of my memory. I took the steaming chicken from the oven as Neil set the table.

That night I lay in bed staring at the ceiling. The glow of the streetlight provided little comfort as my eyes chased the shadows in the dark corners of the room. My heart skipped a beat as I noticed a black figure looming in front of the wardrobe. I peered into the dark, fumbling for the bedside light. *Shit! A coat. It's just a coat hanging up. Stop overreacting.* I exhaled loudly as my heart fluttered in my chest. David snored gently between us. I leaned forward to check on the rest of the children, asleep on their mattresses. Staring at Neil through the dim light, I willed him awake. 'Neil,' I whispered, 'are you asleep?' The thoughts of something in our house made my skin crawl. I could not shake off the uneasy feeling it was watching me.

Neil rubbed his eyes and turned to face me. 'I haven't really slept, what time is it?'

I looked at my digital clock, its numbers glowing red. 'It's gone two. I keep thinking about what happened,' I whispered.

'I know. The growling noises are playing over and over in my head,' he whispered, rubbing his face with his hands as if trying to wash away the memories. It was the closest Neil would get to admitting he was scared.

'Try not to think about it. We'll be fine,' I said in my most convincing voice. I did not want to discuss growling noises and was desperate for sleep. David murmured restlessly. I put my arm around his little body and cuddled into him. The children were my life, and I couldn't bear the thought of

anything happening to them. After a long night of unease, I fell asleep.

The next morning we woke early for church. The day passed without incident and we started our evening watching a movie on our oversized television. Lee called in, and the atmosphere in the house was relaxed as we watched TV. I lay in my usual position, curled up beside Neil on the red cushioned sofa, David and nine year old Alice cuddled up beside me. My attention was drawn to the lights flickering in the living room. Neil and I glanced at each other, trying not to jump to conclusions. I switched on the lamp and turned off the lights for peace of mind. I was tired and hoped for an uneventful night. Lee sat in the chair across from us, chatting as he picked at the fray in the knee of his jeans. I raised my head and sniffed the air. 'Does anyone smell smoke?'

Neil looked up. 'Yeah, I think so. You'd better check the kitchen.'

I followed the direction of the smoke out to the kitchen as our smoke alarms in the hall beeped a piercing chorus. Smoke came billowing through the door as I opened it. Hearing the whirr of the oven, I turned it off, then grabbed a tea towel from the counter and pulled the smoking tray from the oven. Choking a cough, I threw it into the sink and turned on the tap as the drenched tray hissed in protest. I opened the back door and gulped in the fresh air. 'Has anyone turned on the oven and forgotten about it?' I shouted, hoping someone would say yes. Silence. Neil approached me as I flapped the smoke alarm with a tea towel.

He spoke in a low voice to keep the others from hearing. 'I'm worried by this. I don't like the prospect of the oven coming on by itself. What if the house goes on fire when we're in bed?'

'I don't think that could happen. Don't forget the smoke alarms,' I said, pointing out the obvious.

Neil sounded serious. 'Caroline, I didn't want to worry you, but this has happened already. If this thing is able to turn an oven on by itself then disabling a smoke alarm probably wouldn't be that difficult.'

‘Oh. I didn’t think of that.’ Neil turned off the electricity supply switch on the wall to keep it from happening again. Regardless, the switch clicked into life and the oven turned on four times in total that day. We decided to stay and settled back down. I refused to be bullied out of the home I loved, and hoped that by ignoring everything it would leave us alone. However, it was not to be. Lara, our black Cocker Spaniel stared in the direction of the kitchen, narrowing her eyes and emitting a low rumbling growl. I watched as she stood with one paw raised, guarding her territory. She snarled a warning into the silence. Neil tensed beside me. ‘Lara, here baby, what’s wrong?’ I called. She snapped out of her trance, wagging her tail while padding over to me, casting one last glance behind her. Neil walked to the kitchen to check. ‘Everything okay?’ I shouted.

‘Yeah… oh.’ A small clattering noise followed.

I jumped off my chair to check if he was all right. I found Neil looking up at the ceiling and back down at the floor while rubbing the top of his head.

He turned to me, confused. ‘A pen just missed my head. It’s weird, it seemed to come from the ceiling.’

I looked at the pen on the ground. ‘And I hoped for a quiet night,’ I mumbled under my breath. I packed a precautionary bag and left it by the front door in case we needed to get away in a hurry. Alice did not like to go into any of the rooms on her own and followed her sister Sarah around for most of the day. Despite everything that happened, the children did not want to leave for Clacton. I dragged out their mattresses, back onto the floor of our bedroom in preparation for the night ahead. Lara, our cocker spaniel, seemed to sense my worry and walked into our bedroom, her head bowed. She knew she was not allowed in, and I ruffled the fur on her head as she sat next to me. ‘What are we going to do, eh Lara?’

She responded by licking my hand, her tail drumming a beat against our carpeted floor.

That night as the children slept, I regretted our decision to stay. The brave

face I had been wearing began to melt away as I lay in the darkness. Neil's breathing grew shallow, and I fought the urge to wake him. Closing my eyes, I tried to relax, but could not block out the worrying thoughts that demanded an audience. As I grew drowsy my thoughts grew more disturbing, intermingling with scenes from every horror film I had ever watched. I had just fallen into a light sleep before being awoken by a clatter, followed by a chorus of dog barks downstairs. I looked at the clock that glowed three a.m. A feeling of dread washed over me as I tried to muster up the courage to get up and check. Neil was in a deep sleep. After glancing over the children, I pulled the duvet up to my ears and squeezed my eyes shut, blocking out the world. My heartbeat thundered in my ears. I felt like such a coward, but couldn't bring myself to check out the cause of the noise. I preferred walking into a room full of burglars than what could be waiting for me downstairs. The dogs settled down. I tried to slow my breathing. It was a long, endless night. Sunlight filtered through the window blinds, and I fell asleep.

The activity ceased as mysteriously as it had begun. Every day without activity was a glimmer of hope. I did not want to take any chances and arranged for investigators to attend. They were a small team of people, which consisted of mediums and paranormal investigators. Neil believed the activity ceased as the entity was lying low until the mediums left. Entity. That was what Neil called it. I looked the word up in a dictionary, *something that has real existence, being, considered as distinct, independent, self-contained.* The meaning was not as creepy as the word implied, and an improvement on Poltergeist, spirit, or demon. I sighed, trying to come to terms with the alien words that were becoming part of my everyday language.

CHAPTER FIVE

Mediums & Misunderstandings

The mediums arrived the next day. I watched as they unloaded cameras, electronic voice phenomena recorders and various other bits of electrical equipment I did not recognise. ‘Never a dull moment,’ I murmured, peering through the living room blinds before putting on a kettle for coffee and tea. Right now, I would welcome a little boredom into my life. Introductions were made with the family and Lee, who was present to offer his support. The lead investigator was a short red-faced man in his early thirties. He told us to call him *Steve, and introduced a tall slim man named *Greg, whose main concern was the equipment he carried. He nodded a curt acknowledgement as he fiddled with electrical leads.

Steve gestured to the short woman standing behind him, introducing her as *Beth. Her eyes danced around the room, and I guessed she was psychic. I nodded a smile and her bracelets jangled as she shook my hand. She wore a black dress with delicate beading, and her dark hair tumbled down onto her shoulders.

She stepped back as Neil extended his hand to shake hers, unwilling to make the gesture. Putting her hand to her mouth, she tried to explain. ‘I’m really sorry, but I can’t come too close to you.’

Neil smiled quizzically at her reaction.

‘Sorry, I don’t mean to be rude, but I’m a sensitive and pick up on things. Unfortunately, you make me feel quite sick.’

‘I’ve never been told that by a woman before!’ Neil said laughing.

‘I noticed it the minute I walked in. I just need to keep my distance, and I

will be fine.' Beth smiled and went on about her business.

Steve was also a psychic. 'Is it true nobody has lived here before you?'

'Yes,' Neil replied. 'It's just as I said on the phone, we bought this place new.'

Steve rubbed his chin thoughtfully, 'Hmmm, curious.'

'You can have free rein to wander around. I'm willing to sacrifice a bit of privacy so you can help us out,' Neil said.

I nodded in agreement, 'Yes, the children are staying in Clacton tonight so you won't be disturbing anyone.' I realized we were beginning to sound a bit desperate, so I left them to it.

The investigators explored the house, and after half an hour, they joined us downstairs. Steve sat with Neil and Lee in the living room. 'There's nothing malevolent in this house,' Steve declared, 'but it's clear you are the focus of attention.'

Neil narrowed his eyes, clearly unhappy with the sweeping statement.

Steve threw a pen on the ground. 'Can you move that with your mind?'

'Of course not,' Neil said.

'What if you're angry, do you think you could do it then?'

'No, Steve, I couldn't.'

'Do you get mad at things, are you bad tempered?'

I quickly intervened, 'Neil's not an angry person, he likes a quiet life.'

Neil failed to hide his annoyance, and I began to regret inviting the strangers into our home.

Steve asked Lee the same questions. He picked up the pen and threw it again.

Lee laughed and looked at Steve as if he was mad. All the same, he stared at the pen for a few minutes. It did not budge.

Steve turned off the lights and tried communicating in the dark. With no apparent response, he suggested a different tactic and asked if I had any mirrors. I hauled out our full-length framed mirror from my bedroom and

held it in the centre of the floor as instructed. Steve asked Neil to stare into it. He visibly cringed, not enamoured by his reflection at the best of times.

The legs of the dining chair screeched against the wooden floor as Neil dragged it towards the mirror. Sitting down, he leaned forward and stared into the reflective glass.

It's like a scene from Bohemian Rhapsody, I thought as I peeped into the mirror to see Neil's face framed by the other watchers in the dimmed light. I stood until my legs ached, then sat back down, convinced if you stared at anything long enough, something strange would appear. Neil joined me on the sofa, giving up on the mirror experiment.

Before the mediums left, they spent time meditating in silence in an attempt to find some answers.

I looked at my watch. It was getting late and the lack of activity left me disappointed.

Steve suddenly snapped his eyes open and raised his hand in the air. 'Wait, I'm picking something up. Neil and Lee, you both have a bond, pervading through from past lives together.' This gained Neil's attention, and he leaned forward in anticipation. Steve closed his eyes and sat in silence for a few more seconds before continuing. 'Whatever is causing this has also shared a past life with you. In fact, it's possible you were three brothers.'

Beth agreed, 'I've been getting that too. I keep coming up with the words, 'Band of Brothers'.'

Steve agreed with her findings and continued to describe the image of Neil, Lee and a young blonde haired male. They were wearing army uniforms, military style jackets and boots. He described a war ground, tanks, and explosions all around them. 'A bomb went off,' Steve paused, his eyes closed, 'the third man died of a head injury… this affected his rational thought after he passed away.' Steve nodded, as if in silent conversation. 'Yes… He is happy Neil and Lee are back in each other's lives, and he wants to spend time with them together.' Steve opened his eyes and gazed in the

distance.

That was all he could tell us. I wondered if it was true. The story of Neil and Lee having a past connection was interesting.

Steve pointed out the way they were both dressed. ‘Why, look at your clothes? I prove my point.’

I couldn’t help but laugh. He was right. Neil and Lee were identically dressed in light blue jeans, cream coloured sweatshirts, white trainers. They both had the same cropped hairstyles, and the same adolescent sense of humour. Neil discussed the other links he shared with Lee. They both originated from England. They moved to Ireland at around the same time and lived just miles away from each other. They moved back to England at around the same time and took up residence in the same area. It was then that they met, at the local pub.

The investigators stayed many hours trying to help, and then refused to accept any payment. Their equipment failed to pick up anything, apart from what they described as energy lay lines in the house.

The realisation we were alone with our problems sank me into a pit of worry and despair.

Before he left, Steve gave a word of warning. ‘The man I saw may have mental health issues due to his head injuries. This could explain the outbursts. It’s not normal for a spirit to throw knives, so I would exercise caution when dealing with him.’

As they drove into the night, I wondered if Steve was right, and if injuries could be carried on to the afterlife. We carried on as normal the next day, although Steve’s words still rang in my ears as I prepared dinner.

‘Caroline, was that you?’ Neil shouted from the hall.

I put down the potato I’d been peeling. ‘What do you mean?’ I said, as he entered the kitchen.

‘Oh nothing, just thought I heard the toilet flush that’s all,’ he said.

Normally it would not matter, but since the disturbances, Neil had become

extra vigilant. The children were out, and there was nobody else upstairs. I picked up the peeler and carried on making dinner.‘ It’s probably just the pipes.’ I tried not to jump to conclusions. At least the smashing had stopped. We had yet to replace the broken crockery. Instead, we bought some plastic cups until we knew it was safe. After two weeks with no activity, we began to relax. With each passing day, we grew more hopeful that whatever caused the upset had left.

Neil read theories about poltergeists, which stated they normally only lasted for short periods of time. We hoped the entity found peace since the mediums had attended and given some explanation to his connection with Neil and Lee.

Winter turned into spring, and we redecorated the house. It signified new beginnings, and I felt safe enough to allow the children back into their own rooms. Neil was frustrated that he could not solve the mystery. Everything had to be kept private for fear of ridicule. I kept to myself in work, only sharing what had happened with my closest colleagues. Ian was my constant shift partner. With almost thirty years experience in the police, he was hard to shock. Having Stafford as a witness helped, and Ian accepted my experiences as truth. I tried to keep the occurrences to myself as much as I could. I was studying hard for my Detective exams, and the last thing I needed was this nugget of gossip getting out and ruining my credibility.

The house remained peaceful until May, when I developed a troubling feeling things were about to change. Dry static electricity filled the rooms and a heavy sense of oppression returned. I walked in the front door after work, and the edge in Neil’s greeting told me something had occurred. ‘Is everything all right?’ I said, dropping my bag on the floor.

Neil nodded towards Alice who was standing nearby. She was very intuitive and often hung around trying to glean some information.

‘Cup of tea?’ I coughed, nodding towards the kitchen.

Neil followed behind me and closed the door for privacy. He spoke in

hushed tones while taking cups from the cupboard.

‘I’m sorry to tell you this, but it’s started up again.’

‘What happened?’ I asked. The thought of the entity being back in our lives made me feel physically sick.

‘Lee came around for a chat. I was making sandwiches for the kids who had just come home from school. Just then the oven turned on by itself. I switched it off, trying to ignore it. The next thing, a cup slid from the counter and smashed behind us. I barely had time to catch my breath as a glass smashed too.’

‘Why didn’t you call me?’

Neil shrugged. ‘There was no need, I was fine. Lee made a joke about not wanting the parrot to get out and bite him. The next thing I knew, the cage door was wide open.’

‘Is he alright?’ I asked, casting an eye over my new pet.

‘Yeah, he was flapping about a bit, but he was OK. I locked the cage door and tied some string around it. That cage door is hard to open. I think *this thing* was responding to what Lee had to say. I just don’t understand why it happened today, Lee has been here plenty of times before, so I don’t think he’s drawn it here.’

My shoulders sagged as the heavy weight of dread returned. ‘What are we going to do now?’

‘We’ll have to start looking for help. What about the Spiritualist church this time?’ Neil said. We recently declined their offer of help, as all was well.

‘OK, I’ll get back in touch and ask if they can visit. It’s worth a try.’ I opened the fridge door for milk. Pausing, I observed a chilled bottle of white wine. It had been a hard day at work and was not getting any better now I was home. ‘… And cancel the tea, I have a better idea,’ I said, taking my last intact wine glass out of the cupboard.

The Spiritualist group attended the next morning. I opened the front door as they pulled into the drive. Storm clouds loomed overhead, and showers

dappled the brick driveway in front of me. I pulled my hair from my face and shook hands with *Norman, leader of a group of three. He was a thin man in his sixties, with a weather-beaten face, dressed in brown polo neck top and dark trousers. Another man and a woman entered the house behind him, dressed casually, wearing apprehensive smiles. Walking around the house, they commented on the energy lines running through it. I had no idea what it meant, but they seemed to be picking up on something the previous mediums had mentioned. I did not disclose the other psychic's findings as we did not want to influence them in any way. Taking purple crystals from a pouch, Norman placed them in corners of the kitchen and living room. After about an hour, Neil and I sat down with them to discuss their findings.

Suddenly Norman announced he knew the identity of the paranormal being. He stood up in the centre of the living room as if rooted to the spot. 'I have the answer, I know who he is,' he declared vehemently, rubbing his greying beard between his thumb and the crook of his forefinger.

I held my breath in anticipation. Could this be the answer? I wrung my hands with impatience as Norman stabbed the air with his finger.

'The person causing this is a relative, possibly a grandfather. I see a man with an old-fashioned long moustache!' Neil raised an eyebrow at me. I knew what he was thinking – no relative of ours would cause such mayhem. Eager for answers, I was determined to keep an open mind. 'Well the only person I have ever seen with one of those moustaches was my father, back in the seventies. When I was little they were all the rage.' I smiled at the memory. I was about to continue when Norman appeared to have had some kind of revelation.

'There he is,' he stated. 'That's the man there, in the photo. He doesn't have the moustache but that's him.' I looked at the photo in disbelief. It was an old picture of my parents' wedding day, given to me by my mother. 'But that's my father,' I responded in a weak voice.

'Yes, well that's him,' Norman said, resolute.

I folded my arms indignantly, ‘But he’s still alive.’

Neil stifled a snigger as he quickly walked out of the room.

I knew there was no point in these people being here. All the same, at least they had tried, even if it was a disaster. Fancy thinking my father was responsible for all that. He was a kind and gentle man who adored his children. Not to mention the fact he was alive, kicking, and living in Ireland. The mediums did not have much to say after that. I gave them some petrol money and thanked them for coming, assuring them we would leave the crystals in place. Anything was worth a try, although after the night’s performance I did not hold out much hope. Despite the apparent failure of the visit, the activity ceased.

David picked up the crystals and played with them. The house was a lot quieter and the heavy atmosphere lifted. As time passed, I felt more hopeful our lives could return to normal.

Neil refused to become complacent. He carried on with life, refusing to let it get him down. Months passed. It felt safe enough for me to visit my parents in Ireland and I decided to bring Alice with me. David was still quite young and could be a handful when travelling, so he stayed with Neil, Joe, and Sarah.

Neil admitted there had been strange occurrences at his work place. He was working as security with Lee at a holiday park when inexplicable noises came through their radios. At first they heard the radio *click, click, click* as the press to talk button was depressed. Someone was trying to communicate. Neil and Lee tried to concentrate on their work, but it was difficult. The radio clicked again. ‘Uhhhhhhh,’ came through, followed by irritated staff, ‘who the hell is that? Cut it out, we’re trying to work.’

The button pressed again and a loud ‘Grrrrrrrrh,’ followed in a gravelly tone. Menacing noises continued to filter through as the night progressed. The two other men working on security were baffled by the eerie sounds. Neil and Lee were called to the office to check nobody was fooling around.

There were only four radios, so it had to be one of them. They switched channels and immediately the noises continued. They put the radios on the table. Suddenly they heard it *tap… tap… tap*. Neil discovered the background noise was the same wherever he went. If he moved to a noisy area, the growls and snarls had the same noise in the background. At one point they heard a flute playing, and a female voice screaming for help. Neil and Lee kept their opinions to themselves, counting the minutes until their shift was over. Neil reassured me nothing happened when he got home. I tried to pass off the incident as radio interference, not wanting to believe the entity was capable of such activity.

The day before my trip, I was packing to leave when Neil walked into the room, slouching on the bed where I was packing. His expression betrayed his attempt to act normal. ‘Is there something you’re not telling me Neil?’

Neil shrugged his shoulders as he stared at the floor. ‘I don’t know. I’ve not felt right all day.’

I raised my head from my packing. ‘Why? What’s wrong?’

‘I can’t explain it. I just have a weird feeling, like something is going to go wrong. Like he’s coming back.’

We both knew who ‘he’ was, and the thought of it chilled me to the bone. Apart from the incident at Neil’s work, things had been quiet. I did not welcome a return visit from the entity to our home.

‘Would you prefer if I didn’t go to Ireland?’ I did not want to leave if Neil was worried about it, but the last thing he wanted was for me to cancel the trip. I had found it difficult to get the time off and had not seen my parents in over a year.

‘No, No, don’t mind me. I’m just being paranoid,’ Neil said.

I entered our en suite to gather some toiletries and moaned. ‘Ugh. Who put this here?’ Neil walked in to see me picking David’s sodden pants and socks out of the toilet. I was not happy. ‘How did they get in there? They were freshly washed too!’ Neil’s silence spoke volumes.

I left for Ireland as planned and felt a sense of relief when the plane touched down. It was good to be back. It had been a long time since I had been able to relax at night, and staying in my parent’s house was just the tonic I needed. I made it through arrivals and hugged my mother tight. I told myself that things would be fine at home, and nothing would happen in the short time I was away. I had no idea things were about to take a very nasty turn.

CHAPTER SIX

A Bad Premonition

July 2010

Neil could not shake off the sense of foreboding gnawing inside him. The build up of static electricity in the house also signified a bad omen. The next day Lee visited to watch television with Neil, and the home telephone began to ring as soon as he sat down. Neil hesitated, unsure if he wanted to answer it. Slowly he picked it up and put it to his ear. Silence. He disconnected the call, jumping as it rang into life again. Neil pressed the answer button and reluctantly listened to the phone again. ‘No answer,’ he said. He replaced the phone in its cradle, and it immediately rang again.

Lee looked at Neil, scratching his head. ‘Maybe it’s a fault with the phone line,’ he said, his words sounding hollow.

A cold feeling of dread washed over Neil as his mobile phone rang, demanding his attention. He stood in a trance, wondering how an everyday object could become such an implement of torment. Pulling the phone from his pocket, he looked at the display in disbelief. ‘How can this be? The call is coming from our house phone.’

Lee bit his fingernails as he paced the room. ‘Don’t answer it. Just leave it Neil.’

Neil pressed the button to reject the call, and the lights flickered from the ceiling overhead. ‘We’d better check the house, I have a very bad feeling about this.’

Lee sloped in after Neil into the kitchen.

Neil ran his hand over the black kitchen counter, everything was as it should be. He opened the door of the oven to ensure it was cold, and the cooker hob was switched off. Finally, he pressed his hand against the fridge and cupboard doors, ensuring they were closed. Shoving his hands in his jean pockets, he gave Lee the nod everything was OK.

‘It’s just trying to frighten us. Maybe you should put the telly on and try to ignore it,’ Lee said. They walked towards the living room, and a gust of wind hit them as the door slammed loudly in their faces.

Lee jumped back and looked at Neil. The door would not budge. ‘This is not going to get the better of me,’ Lee said. Putting his two hands on the door handle, Lee strained to open the door. ‘It won’t open… It feels like someone is holding the handle from the other side,’ he said through gritted teeth.

Neil watched Lee’s face redden as he tried to force the handle down. He was right, it would not shift. If one of the children managed to go into the living room without them knowing, there was no way they would have been strong enough to stop Lee opening the door. All the same, he needed to check. Neil walked through the other entrance to the living room and shouted through the door. ‘There’s nobody touching the other side mate, can’t you still open it?’

Lee sounded exasperated, ‘No… Oh!’ He fell through the door as it suddenly released.

Neil frowned as he considered the implications of what just occurred. ‘I’m getting the kids out. We’re leaving.’

Lee stood back from the door struggling to comprehend what just happened. He surveyed the redness on his hands as he waited for his friend to gather up the children.

Neil ran upstairs. ‘Hey David, we’re staying with Nanny and Granddad tonight, you’ll like that won’t you?’

Sarah groaned loudly from her bedroom as Neil opened the door. She hastily grabbed the array of course papers scattered on the bed around her.

She scowled at Neil. ‘Why can’t we stay? I was just in the middle of…’

‘I said we’re leaving NOW Sarah, don’t ask questions. Just pack a bag as quick as you can.’

‘None of my friends have to contend with anything like this,’ she huffed, shoving her homework into her drawstring bag, crumpling the pages.

Neil telephoned his parents to tell them he was on his way over. *Bang*. A door slammed loudly downstairs. ‘Hurry up kids,’ Neil said.

Lee helped him usher the children outside, putting on coats and grabbing bags as they hurried out the door. *Bang.* Another door slamming from inside the house. Neil secured the front door. Fleeing from the house to the cars, he heard what he presumed were hailstones. In July? It didn’t make sense. ‘*Clack… Clack… Clack.*’ Objects clattered against the roof of the house and bounced on the ground below.

Neil looked upwards and realised it was not hail stones, but small pebbles, enough for several handfuls, being thrown from thin air. ‘Christ!’ he said, fighting to keep control in front of the children as the stones pelted down.

Sarah squinted upwards. ‘What is that?’

Neil shepherded the children into the car, ‘Nothing, it’s okay. Just put on your seat belts.’ He fumbled with David’s car seat and clicked the belt into place. Jumping into the front seat, he could not get out quick enough as the pebbles clattered to the ground. Revving the engine into life, he pulled away from the drive, giving the house one last disbelieving look. Neil watched Lee turn off for home and gave him a grateful wave. He would speak to him later. Right now, he needed to get the kids to safety.

He was astounded by what had just occurred. This thing was not following the traditional hauntings that were reported in books and on television. It was as frightening as it was unpredictable. Neil gripped the steering wheel tightly, feeling an overwhelming responsibility for the children in his care. How the hell was he meant to keep them safe? Just how powerful was this thing? What did it want from him? The journey passed in a blur and before long, he

was in Clacton.

Valerie was ready for the children and had food prepared. The children beleaguered Neil with questions that he could not answer. Valerie tried to pacify them, and soothed away the younger children's concerns with chocolate treats and cuddles. That evening Neil settled the children and arranged to pick up Lee and return to the house.

'I don't like you going back there,' Valerie whispered, walking out to the hall with Neil, 'it's not safe.'

'It's OK Mum, I'll be with Lee. Besides, I have to check on the dogs.'

Valerie winced as she rubbed her shoulder. 'I'd go with you, but my arthritis is really playing up.'

Neil grabbed his leather jacket on his way out the door. 'Don't be daft, I've got my mobile on me, I'll call if we have any problems.' He patted his pockets absently. *Cigarettes, lighter, keys, phone. Good to go.* Feeling like he was going into battle, he squared his shoulders as he walked to the car.

He picked up Lee on route, he was ready but not willing. Neil knew he was asking a lot of his friend, but nobody else understood. The journey to the house felt endless, and Neil's stomach began to churn as it came into view. Cursing the dimming light, he pulled the car outside the drive. He did not know if it was a premonition or just nerves, but every atom of his being screamed at him not to go inside. He planned to let the dogs out, leave them food, water, and secure the house. A loud clatter hit the roof of the car.

'What the hell was that?' Lee exclaimed, looking up through the windscreen.

It was almost dark, and Neil guessed it was pebbles showering them.

'This is crazy,' Lee shouted as he and Neil got out of the car, ducking down while shielding their heads with their hands. They both briefly hesitated outside the house, uncertain about going in.

'Ready?' Neil asked Lee, trying to muster up all his courage. There was nobody else around, which was probably a good thing.

‘Yeah mate,’ Lee answered. Suddenly Lee pointed behind him. ‘Look out!’

Neil turned to hear a loud *bang* as an object hit the roof of his car parked in the drive. He jumped back in surprise. Instead of bouncing off the roof like the other stones, the object had stayed on top of the car where it landed. It seemed as if it was magnetised to the roof. Neil looked at the object and picked it up to examine it. It was a small brick coloured rock, which had left a dent in its place. ‘That could have been my head,’ Neil whispered. He decided to take his chances in the house. Shaking, he struggled to get the key inside the front door. Adrenalin raced through his body and as pebbles clattered onto the drive he realised he was once again under fire. ‘Get in, get in,’ Neil growled at the key, willing it to turn. The familiar ring tone of his mobile phone played out. The door opened as Neil put the phone to his ear. ‘Hello?’ Neil answered breathlessly, hoping to hear a friendly voice. Instead he was greeted with a loud scratching noise. Frowning, he disconnected the call and shoved the phone deep into his trouser pocket. Neil pushed the door open and spoke to Lee. ‘Right, you let the dogs out the back and I’ll get their food ready.’

Lee nodded, his face cloaked in apprehension. The dogs came bounding out, and he opened the back door.

Clang. A butter knife whizzed by Neil’s shoulder and hit the ground with force. ‘Ah,’ Neil shouted, ‘Watch out mate, it’s throwing knives.’ He picked up the object and put it away.

‘Whoa.’ Lee swerved as a fork struck the ground beside him. ‘That nearly hit me.’

Neil tried to focus. ‘Let’s get the dogs sorted and get the hell out of here.’ He prepared the food quickly and put it in the dogs’ room. The air was punctuated with clanging noises as more missiles of cutlery were flung wildly in their direction. ‘Just leave the lights on, I’m not walking out in the dark,’ Neil shouted. With the house secured, Neil and Lee made their way outside. *Clack… Clack… Clack.* The attacks were relentless, and pebbles rained down

on them again. They jumped into the car and started the engine. Driving away from the house, Neil felt the tension slowly leave his body.

‘I can’t believe that. Can you imagine what would have happened if we stayed there?’ Lee said.

‘I know. Those stones came from thin air, and the rock… it worries me. What if that hit us? How would we explain it?’ Neil was relieved he was not on his own.

Lee was having similar thoughts. ‘Err, Neil, do you mind if I come back with you for a while?’

It was a reasonable request. Nobody would want to be on their own after such a frightening experience. ‘Yeah, of course you can.’ Neil was happy to help Lee in return. Neil’s mobile phone rang continuously all the way back to his parents’ flat. He answered it twice to hear the same scratching noises. He put the phone on vibrate and tried to ignore it.

Lee’s mobile phone rang. He pulled it out of his jacket pocket and showed Neil the caller display. The call was coming from Neil’s house. ‘There is no way I’m answering that!’ Lee said, emitting a nervous laugh. He turned off his phone, but the calls persisted as Neil’s phone rang out.

‘It’s calling me now,’ Neil said. He did not want to turn off his phone in case his mother tried to call. She might worry when there was no answer at home.

‘Just ignore it,’ Lee said, taking a cigarette from his packet of tobacco and unwinding the window. The phone rang continuously throughout their journey to Clacton. ‘Maybe if I answer it will stop,’ Neil said, parking outside his mother’s flat. He pressed the answer button on his mobile phone and held his breath as he put the phone to his ear. All he could hear was the same scratching noise he heard earlier. He hung up the phone, vowing not to answer it again.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Voices From Beyond

Neil and Lee walked into the flat just as Valerie's home phone began to ring. 'Mum, be careful answering that, check who it's from,' Neil warned.

Valerie put on her glasses and looked at the phone display, her eyebrows knitted together in a frown. 'Why are you ringing me?' 'Neil' displayed on the caller ID. His locked phone was deep in his pocket. Unperturbed, Valerie accepted the call. 'Hello? Hello?' After a few seconds she hung up. 'There's nobody there apart from some funny scratching sound. Never mind, I'll make a cup of tea, and you can tell me what's been happening.' Valerie shuffled into the kitchen and gave a short gasp. 'Who put that there?'

Neil followed her in to see a bottle of washing up liquid on the centre of the floor. 'Oh God, not here as well,' he said, holding his palm to his forehead and closing his eyes.

Valerie stood with her hands on her hips and tutted. It was one thing seeing strange occurrences in her son's home, but she did not welcome activity like this in her own flat.

Neil's father Ben abruptly folded his newspaper under his arm and strode to his room. 'I don't want to hear about it, I'm going to bed.'

Neil and Lee stayed up in the sitting room talking while everyone else went to bed. Some hours later Lee fell asleep on the chair opposite. Neil sat back in the leather chair, tiredness overcoming him. The Grandfather clock in the hall bonged the arrival of each hour. *Bloody clock,* Neil thought as the incessant ticking made the night long and drawn. His eyelids became heavy, and he began to snooze. A sudden slap to the top of his head made him leap

forward, disorientated, and confused.

‘What’s wrong?’ Lee asked, his voice drowsy from sleep. Neil looked down at his father’s cloth glass case resting on his lap. It was not the only thing to be thrown his way. As Neil dozed off, tablemats, a tea towel and Lacy doily were thrown lightly in his direction. His head bobbed in exhaustion as he tried to stay awake. As the clock bonged four, the torment stopped long enough for him to get some sleep. Lee went home as dawn broke, dark shadows circling his eyes from lack of sleep.

Valerie cooked breakfast as she spoke, her back turned to Neil. He breathed in the aroma of bacon and eggs, and temporarily zoned out. ‘… And I agree with your father, you’re going to see Father *Luke today after mass. Those mediums mean well, but you know as well as I do, the Catholic Church are the only ones that can do a proper exorcism.’

Neil’s head snapped upwards. *Did she just say exorcism? How does she know about exorcisms?* ‘All right mum, don’t nag, I’ll go. But not on my own.’

‘You don’t need to worry about that,’ Valerie said, serving up. ‘Your father is going with you.’

Neil and his father waited outside the church after service, the sounds of the choir filtering through the air. Neil shuffled his feet in the churchyard gravel, still trying to work out how he would approach the subject of exorcisms in a tactful manner.

The congregation exited the church. He was five years old again as his father grabbed him by the arm and marched him up to the priest. Neil opened his mouth and stuttered, trying to find the right words.

‘Oh for heaven’s sake,’ Ben uttered as he looked at Father Luke and sighed. ‘He’s got a ghost,’ he blurted, jabbing his thumb in Neil’s direction.

Neil cringed in embarrassment. His father did not waste any time. Neil explained as best as he could to the elderly priest, who said he would ‘look into it’ when they suggested an exorcism.

Neil and Lee returned to the house the next day to drive Joe and Sarah to school. It was decided David would stay in Clacton until Neil knew the house was safe. The car rumbled onto the drive, and Neil hoped everything would be okay. Things always seemed better in daylight. Neil got out and hesitated before letting the children out of the back.

Sarah knocked impatiently on the car window, ‘Can we get out now?’ She rattled the door handle, the child lock preventing her escape.

Neil ignored her pleas as he looked up at the sky. It was clear. ‘They weren’t there yesterday,’ he extended a finger towards the scattering of pebbles on the brickwork. ‘That must be what fell on us last night.’

Lee glanced up at the roof, preoccupied with the bigger stones. ‘Are your roof tiles loose Neil?’

‘No, why, what’s wrong?’

Lee pointed to the pieces of brick stuck in the guttering of the house. ‘One of them looks like the rock that fell on the car last night.’ Unless someone got up with a stepladder onto the roof it would have been impossible.

Neil hoped the rocks would stay where they were. He opened the car and the children rushed to the front door. ‘Wait! Let me in first,’ Neil said, blocking their path with his arm. He cautiously glanced into the kitchen and living room. Shafts of light flooded in through the window blinds and the dogs barked a chorus, demanding his attention. ‘All right, come through,’ Neil said over the barks of the dogs, imploring their freedom.

Sarah and Joe climbed upstairs to get changed so Neil and Lee could drop them to school. Not long after returning to the house the second time, the phone began to ring.

Neil slowly picked up the phone and put it to his ear. Scratching noises clawed their way down the line, but this time accompanied by a gasping, groaning noise in the background. ‘Uuuuuuuuuh,’ it moaned. Neil held the phone away from his ear, his face ashen.

‘Who was it?’ Lee asked. A flicker of fear ran through Neil. The entity was

evolving. ‘It’s changed. It's trying to speak.’ Neil shakily dropped the phone back into the cradle. ‘Whatever it’s trying to say, I don’t want to hear it.’

A loud clanging noise rang from the kitchen, and the dogs barked in response. They stood their ground in the hall, refusing to go in. Lee frowned. ‘We better check it out.’

Neil led the way into the kitchen. A large metal frying pan lay in the middle of the floor. He picked it up and put it away, wondering if it was a response to his comment about the phone. Scanning the rest of the kitchen, Neil took a mental image of every item’s placement. He walked back into the living room with Lee to spend some time with the dogs, which had been starved of attention since the calamities began. ‘Aw, bloody hell!’ Neil said. Large red sofa cushions were scattered all over the floor. He rubbed his face, wondering if he was ever going to get any peace. He thought of his friend Chris, who expressed his interest in further occurrences. Neil gave him a quick call and invited him around, hoping there would be safety in numbers. Chris lived nearby and stated he would be there within minutes.

The phone rang just as Neil ended the call. It was his older brother, Andrew, who lived with his family in London. Word had spread and Andrew was curious. Neil filled him in while Lee replaced the cushions in an attempt to restore some normality. Andrew had never been a believer in the Paranormal, but he wanted to help.

‘Why don’t you ask it what it wants?’ Andrew suggested.

‘You must be joking! I’m not asking that. What if it says something?’ Neil’s voice tapered off as he heard a faint cackle down the phone. ‘Did you just laugh?’

‘No, why?’ Andrew said.

‘Oh, nothing, thought I heard something that’s all.’ Neil walked into the kitchen to light a cigarette when his attention was drawn to the microwave.

‘Hang on, I’ve found something.’ Neil reached for a folded piece of paper, which was sticking out of the top of the microwave door. He unfolded the

paper and gasped.

‘Neil?’ Andrew asked.

‘Shit,’ the note quivered in Neil’s hands.

‘Neil are you there?’ Andrew demanded again, concern growing in his voice.

‘I’m here… I just found a piece of paper. It’s got some writing on it… It says… NEIL’.

‘That doesn’t sound good, maybe you should get out of there.’

Neil needed time to think. ‘It’s all right. Listen Andrew I’ve got to go, I’ll ring you tonight.’ He joined Lee in the sitting room and slouched down in the seat before his legs gave way. Handing Lee the note, he tried to comprehend the meaning. *What does it mean? Does it want me?* The writing was scrawled in purple pen.

Lee’s eyes widened as Neil explained its origin.

Neil took the note back, folded it carefully, and shoved it in his pocket. A mixture of curiosity and dread overcame him. Written messages were taking proceedings a step further. A knock at the front door signalled Chris’s arrival. ‘Come in,’ Neil said, greeting his friend, ‘didn’t take you long to get here.’

Chris smiled, slightly out of breath, ‘I didn’t want to miss anything. What’s been happening?’

‘Plenty. But first I need a cigarette, do you want one?’

‘I suppose one wouldn’t do any harm,’ Chris said, walking behind Neil and Lee towards the kitchen. Suddenly, a small round ashtray gave flight as it hurtled from the dining room table in Chris’s direction, hitting the floor with a bang. Lee sidestepped as Chris jumped back to avoid it.

‘Did you see that?’ Chris said, having witnessed his first paranormal encounter.

‘Huh, that’s nothing,’ Neil said from the kitchen, ‘you should see this.’

Neil explained the most recent occurrences and showed Chris the note.

Chris stared at the paper, deep in thought. ‘You know what you should do

now, don’t you,’ he said.

It was apparent they did not as both Lee and Neil looked at him blankly.

‘Get a pen and paper and ask it to write some more, find out who this is.’

‘Yeah, that’s a good idea.’ Neil stubbed out his cigarette and blew the remainder of the smoke out the corner of his mouth. He began pulling open kitchen drawers, scattering their contents everywhere.

‘Are you all right mate?’ Lee asked.

‘I’m trying to find a pen – ah, here’s one.’ Satisfied, he pulled out a chewed marker pen and scrap of frayed paper. He tapped the paper with the pen, wondering what to write. Neil scribbled, ‘Please tell me your name’ on the paper, leaving it on the kitchen counter.

The men sat and waited in the living room, tapping their feet. After a couple of minutes of small talk, Chris raised his head and nodded towards the kitchen. ‘That should be enough time. Will we have a look?’

Neil steeled himself to check for an answer. He was still pretty shaken up by what he found earlier, and was not sure he wanted to see what else had been written.

‘Look, it’s written something,’ Chris whispered. A scrawl stained the paper in purple ink. He picked it up to examine it. The letter ‘D’ was squiggled on the paper. ‘Maybe we interrupted him, we’d better leave it and give him more time,’ Chris said, fascinated. But Chris was to be disappointed. He stayed for another hour and nothing else occurred. Chris said his goodbyes and made his way home.

Neil decided to check the kitchen one more time. He picked up the paper. ‘Look at that… it’s written with a different pen, where did it get the pen from?’

‘He’s probably got a little shop in the sky,’ Lee chuckled, looking over Neil’s shoulder. An ‘0’ and an ‘8’ were shakily written in blue ink.

Perplexed, Neil put the paper away. A door slammed loudly upstairs, and a saucepan fell to the floor in the kitchen. Neil bit his lip. He had a feeling the

entity did not appreciate Chris's visit. A loud bang vibrated upstairs.

Neil needed answers. He telephoned Steve, the psychic who attended the house previously. He answered his phone on the first ring. The conversation was punctuated by banging noises from upstairs and clanging from the kitchen as appliances were flung to the floor. Neil tried to explain, and the occurrences became increasingly violent as the house came alive. Doors slammed shut, and banging noises vibrated against the walls in an angry display of power. The entity was in full flow and Neil was at his wits end. 'Can you come Steve? It's happening now, can you hear it?'

'Yes, I can hear it. You really should get out of there,' Steve said. His voice was calm, indicating no apparent wish to join him.

'Can you help? My wife's not here, and I don't know what to do.'

Steve snorted unsympathetically. 'Your marriage isn't going to last with all this going on.'

'What? What the hell does that mean?'

Steve continued, 'I'm just saying, generally marriages don't last when these sort of things happen. Its unlikely you'll stay together.'

Neil was aghast. 'Who the hell are you, to tell me my marriage won't last? Nothing will come between me and my wife.'

'Look Neil, I just meant…'

Neil interrupted him mid-sentence. 'Don't bother, forget I called.' Neil hung up the phone and relayed the news to Lee. 'I don't understand it. He doesn't want to know. The stuff he was saying… it didn't make sense.' His sentence was punctuated by a coffee cup smashing as it hit the floor.

Lee put his hand on Neil's shoulder. 'Don't worry about it, look, this thing is really pissed off, let's go.' Lee looked ready to bolt at any minute.

Neil grew aware of his surroundings and walked briskly to the back door to lock it. A fork flung itself in his direction, narrowly missing his head. His breath quickened as he dug in his jeans pocket for his car keys. He rushed to the hall, jumping as the kitchen door slammed behind him with force. 'Shit,'

Neil exclaimed. Fumbling with his car keys, he dropped them on the floor. He glanced behind him before crouching to pick the keys up and ran to the front door, where Lee was already waiting. A shower of stones pinged against the ground and the metal of the parked cars outside. Neil's phone rang into life as he rushed to open the car door. He stood frozen with fear, the realisation hitting him. *Nowhere is safe. There is no getting away from it.* He watched Lee take cover inside his own car that was parked in behind his.

'Get in the car!' Lee shouted through the open door, trying to avoid the hail of stones.

Neil tried to run, but his legs felt like rubber bands. As if in slow motion, he forced his legs to move, one in front of the other, towards his car. He watched his hands open the car door and got inside. He slammed his door shut, the stones bouncing on the roof of his car. Forcing the key into the ignition, his whole body trembled with fear. *Clack… clack… clack!* A handful of stones narrowly missed Neil's head and hit the inside dashboard. A bolt of horror ripped through him. The stones came from *inside* the car.

'Ahhh, fucking hell!' his voice a strangled scream, Neil raised his hands to protect his head. He fought for breath as the air got thinner. There was nowhere to turn. Not even his car was safe. Lee began to drive away. Pulling the key from the ignition, Neil pushed open the car door and stumbled out.

Lee slammed on his brakes as Neil jumped in front of the hood of his car. 'Bloody Hell Neil, I nearly ran you over. Are you all right?'

Neil bent over, hyperventilating as he tried to get his words out. 'I… the… car… hit… in… side' came out in a whimper. Neil stooped over clutching his sides. His heart pounded in his chest, and tears filled his eyes as he blinked them away.

Lee jumped out of his car and supported Neil as he walked up the road to catch his breath.

Neil sucked in air, trying to steady his breathing. He pulled his mobile phone out of his pocket with shaking hands and pressed the speed dial for his

mother’s number.

Valerie answered on the first ring. ‘Neil, are you all right?’ All she could hear in response was Neil’s sobs as he broke down, the accumulation of events hitting him hard.

Lee took the phone from Neil and gently explained, ‘Valerie, I’m not sure, but I think something happened in the car. Neil’s in a very bad way.’

‘Can you drive him over to us? He’s in no fit state to drive.’ Valerie’s voice was peppered with concern.

Lee agreed and escorted Neil to the car.

There was to be no respite for Neil that night. His mobile phone rang constantly to reveal the same distorted noises, ‘Ahuuuuhhhhhh,’ groaned the tormentor. It shook him to the core.

‘Don’t answer them,’ Valerie said, angry with her son’s persecutor. No sooner had she spoken the words than her own phone rang out. ‘How is this? It says it’s coming from your phone.’ Neil’s phone was alight as it sat on the arm of the chair. The display stated it was making a call to his mother.

‘I’ve had enough of these games,’ Neil said. Grabbing the phone, he turned it off. ‘I’m taking the batteries out, so they won’t ring.’

Valerie nodded her head in agreement as Neil removed the batteries and slumped down on the sofa, exhausted. They sat together in the stillness, the ticking of the Grandfather clock echoing in the hall.

Neil looked out the window at the moon, full and heavy, reflecting against the sea. His world had become a different place. He realised his whole life was an illusion, as fragmented as the broken reflection on the rippled waters.

An hour passed and Valerie sat up in her chair, satisfied at least for now, her son was safe. She yawned, took off her glasses and rubbed the bridge of her nose. ‘I’m going to bed. You should try to get some sleep.’

Neil made up the sofa bed and lay down, painfully aware of the empty space beside him. Drained from the horrors of the day, he wished he could have his old life back, the one he took for granted. He closed his eyes and

sank into his pillow. The *brrring brrring* of the telephone seeped through the haze of sleep. Confused, he got out of bed and picked up the home phone, still ringing in his hand. He looked at the display. It flashed up *Neil*. He stared in disbelief. Neil dropped the phone like a hot coal as he realised what was happening.

Valerie walked out of her room, pulling on her dressing gown. She glanced at the batteries, still on the coffee table where Neil left them. ‘How is this possible?’ she said, picking up the phone. Unanswered, the phone fell into silence, and the lit display fell blank.

Coldness ran through Neil and he shivered involuntarily.

Valerie made tea, and they stayed up until the early hours of the morning, when they went back to bed.

Eventually Neil was rewarded with sleep, but peace eluded him. His dreams brought forward unpleasant images as all his fears took centre stage.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Frustration

My heart sank when Neil unburdened himself to me over the telephone the next day. I wrapped the phone cord around my fingers, trying to take it in. Banging noises interrupted his sentences as he explained he was briefly at home, feeding the dogs. I grappled with the prospect of the entity's return. A sharp tinny noise rattled in the background 'What was that?' I asked.

'Bloody hell, it's come through the ceiling,' Neil said, his voice pitched up a notch.

I gripped the phone anxiously. 'What is it?'

'I just looked up – and an empty coke can came through the ceiling and nearly hit me on the head. Lee is here with me, he's seen it too.'

Wishing I were home, the limits of my imagination was tested once more. How could solid matter pass through solid matter? Neil was convinced, and I heard the empty can fall. 'This is crazy Neil, I'm going to get an earlier flight and come home today.'

'No, don't worry about me. I'm going back to my Mum's. I'll be fine.' Neil's voice drifted off as he spoke, sounding like a beaten man.

I did not like the way it was affecting him. He was spending more and more time at home since his security work dried up, and the latest paranormal activity was sure to send him into a downward spiral. I tried to comfort him as best I could. 'Neil you're going to have to get outside help. Go back to the church and tell them you want an exorcism.'

'I don't know, I've heard exorcisms can make it worse. We don't know what we're dealing with here.'

I bit the skin around my fingernails. It was a new habit, borne out of frustration. I was used to dealing with problems face on. ‘No Neil, we have to take positive action and face the consequences. Surely it can’t be worse than what’s happening already?’

‘What’s that doing there?’ Neil said, changing the subject.

‘What’s going on?’ I asked. My stomach churned as my helplessness grew.

‘It’s the crucifix, you know, the wooden one?’

‘What about it,’ I said, recalling the lengths I went to buy it as it originated from Bethlehem.

‘Well one minute it was on the wall in the kitchen, and now – it’s lying on the sofa.’

The message was not lost on me. It was no coincidence that we were just discussing speaking to the church. Was this a sinister message from the entity to proclaim it was up for the challenge? My advice was stern and concise. ‘Neil. Get out of the house right now and go and see the priests’

‘OK, I’m going. I’ll speak to you later.’

I decided to confide in my mother Bridie. My mother was short in stature and fiercely independent. Like me, she refused to accept the grey hairs Mother Nature tried to enforce upon her, and made regular trips to the hairdressers to keep herself looking young. Her twin sister Winifred lived in a granny flat next door. Winifred was a veritable powerhouse of prayer. She attended church every day and despite being in their seventies, both Winifred and my mother went out most days, busying themselves visiting family and friends. My mum listened intently as I spoke. I knew it was hard for her living so far away since I moved to England. Although amazed by what was happening, she supported me fully. She knew I was not the type of person to make things up or exaggerate, and I felt the tension ease from my neck and shoulders as she accepted my account without question.

That night I lay in bed taking still breaths, listening intently for every noise. The sounds of the countryside filtered through the blackness and I

missed the comforting glow of the streetlights outside. My imagination took over as darkness encompassed me, growing new worries and fears. I sank into the bed and turned over, grabbing the heavy quilt as I moved. The soft mattress bounced gently with my movement, and I relaxed into the comfort. My sleep was disturbed by a creaking noise in the hall. Blindly, I reached out in the dark and opened the door beside the bed. Light filtered through the crack to reveal a thick shadowy figure standing in the dark. My heart missed a beat. I flicked on my bedroom light for a better look. A sense of relief flooded over me. ‘Daddy?’ I whispered.

He looked at me briefly, expressionless, and then walked into the kitchen without turning on the light. My father was sleepwalking, and didn’t appear to hear me. Shortly afterwards his footsteps echoed in the hall as he shuffled back to his room. It sparked off thoughts of home and the familiar feeling of dread washed over me. I bit my lip, determined not to cry. It had been a mistake leaving Neil. I should have stayed with him. The blame and regret left me unable to sleep until dawn.

The next day my mother brought me out to catch up with family. It was lovely seeing my cousins again, and Alice enjoyed playing with their children, who were a couple of years younger than her. She followed them into their bedroom, keen to explore. I sat around the broad kitchen table with my aunt Nancy and cousin Sylvia, confiding my problems. They were fully supportive and came to the joint conclusion we had to return to the Catholic Church. They seemed the only ones equipped to deal with it.

The next morning my mother threw me an amused smile as she hung up the phone. ‘Caroline, how much does Alice know about what has happened in the house?’

‘Very little, we try to keep as much as we can from her. Why?’

‘Well it looks like she knows something. Your cousin Sylvia was on the phone. Apparently, her daughter didn’t get a wink of sleep last night. Alice has been telling her ghost stories.’ My mother chuckled at the news.

Putting my head in my hands, I cringed with embarrassment. ‘Oh dear, I will have to speak with Alice.’ I apologised to my cousin, who took it in good spirits. However, I could not afford any repetitions.

The next day I was all set to return home. As I hugged my mother and Winifred goodbye, I knew they would busy themselves saying countless prayers for us. After an uneventful flight, the plane touched down in Stansted airport. I recovered my luggage while ensuring Alice was still in tow. I walked through to the arrivals lounge, excited at the prospect of seeing Neil after our time apart. I searched for his face through the bustling crowds of people.

‘Daddy,’ Alice shouted, rushing forward to give him a hug.

The sight that greeted me left me shocked. Neil looked like he had aged ten years in my short time away. A guilty pang hit me. His nerves must have been shot to pieces. With his pale haggard face and dark shadows under his eyes, he looked like he hadn’t slept in the whole time I was gone. I masked my shocked expression with a smile as he wrapped his arms around me in a bear hug.

‘I’ve missed you,’ he breathed the words into my hair, in no hurry to let go.

Alice chatted excitedly with Sarah, who had come along with Neil for the drive. Sarah was wearing a cute red beanie hat, which framed her long dark hair.

A look of concern flickered across her face and I sensed she wanted to tell me something. I flashed her a look that meant it could wait until we were in private.

Neil was quiet on the journey home, and I noticed he was blinking excessively. ‘Are you OK hun?’ I asked, ‘it’s just that you seem to be blinking an awful lot.’

‘Yeah I know, I can’t help it,’ Neil responded quietly.

I had never seen him so low, and it broke my heart. I gazed out the window

at the blurred traffic whizzing past. Resentment cut through me. The entity had been waiting for me to leave all along in order to take advantage of Neil when he was at his most vulnerable. I tightened my hands into fists. I hated it. I hated the thing that was forcing us out of our home. *Why Neil? What has he done to deserve this? Just how far will this thing go?* I swallowed through the tightness in my throat. I would not get upset. I vowed to myself I would find a way of protecting our family.

We drove straight to Clacton. Neil had not slept in the house since the occurrences resumed. I was relieved I would not have to face sleeping in our bedroom that night.

David rushed towards me in excitement, planting kisses on my face as I bent down to hug him. He busied himself searching my luggage for his present. He had no idea what had been going on in the house, and at just four years of age could not be expected to understand why he could not return home. He missed his room, which housed far too many toys and games. He also missed being able to jump around, as my in-laws were in the top flat in a building that housed mainly retired residents who liked their peace and quiet. He asked for the hundredth time why we could not go home, and I explained we had to get the cleaners in as there were bugs in the house. Not an ideal story, but it bought me some time. I hoped he would not share that particular gem of information with his friends.

Later that night I settled the children and the youngest quickly fell asleep. I flicked the hall light on and switched off their bedroom light, opening the door to allow the crack of light to flood through. Sarah sat up in her sleeping bag, waiting to speak to me. I crouched down beside her and put my hand on hers.

‘You OK hun?’ I whispered.

‘I’m OK, but I think things have been very bad for Neil.’ Sarah frowned, twiddling with her hair.

I nodded. Neil’s reluctance to talk about what happened spoke volumes.

‘And the phone call… it was horrible. I can’t get that noise out of my head.’

I scowled as my eyes met hers. ‘What phone call?’

‘When we were waiting for you at the airport, Neil’s phone kept ringing. He left it with me while he went to have a cigarette, in case you rang. I knew I shouldn’t… but I answered it.’ Sarah looked at me remorsefully. ‘I was curious, and wanted to hear it.’

The thought of Sarah taking the call made me feel very uncomfortable. ‘What did you hear?’ I whispered, not wanting to disturb the others.

‘It was really weird, this rubbing, scratching noise. It freaked me out.’

‘Sarah promise me one thing,’ I said sternly, ‘You must never answer the phone again if you don’t recognise the caller.’

Sarah looked as if she had already learned her lesson. ‘Don’t worry I won’t. Anyway I’m fine, I just wanted to let you know.’ She settled down in her sleeping bag and yawned. ‘Goodnight mum, I’m glad you’re back.’

I smoothed over her hair and tucked a loose tendril behind her ear. Leaning over, I kissed her on the forehead. ‘Goodnight sweetheart, see you in the morning.’ I walked out to the living room to find the sofa bed already made up. Neil’s parents had gone to bed. I quickly changed and slid between the sheets.

Neil stood at the light switch and asked, ‘Will I turn it off? Do you want a light on?’

I looked out the window at the clouds blotting out the moon. ‘Leave on the kitchen light,’ I whispered.

Neil walked into the small fitted kitchen, which adjoined the living room where we were sleeping. He flicked the light on and turned off the living room light. Looking bushed, he climbed into bed and kissed me goodnight. I closed my eyes and snaked my arm around his waist, grateful that everything seemed normal in the flat. Apart from the initial incidents nothing more had occurred there. It felt like a refuge. I knew we were fortunate to have

somewhere to stay. It would have felt awful to be a victim all alone with nowhere to go. The sounds of the sea lapping the shore filtered through the open bay windows as I drifted off to sleep.

The next day we visited our house. We had some serious decisions to make. Twirling my cross and chain around my neck, we discussed our plans.

'What about selling the car?' Neil asked.

'What's the car got to do with anything?' I said.

'Don't you remember? Some really strange stuff happened before Christmas. I wonder if it has anything to do with what's going on.'

'I can't remember, what strange stuff?'

'I knew you weren't listening to me before.' Neil said, 'I was at the pub with Chris and Lee one night before Christmas, and offered to drive them home. We'd driven a short distance up the road when some loud thumps came from the boot of the car. Chris and Lee shouted at me to stop the car as we thought maybe some drunk had climbed inside by accident.' Neil gave a short laugh as he recalled the incident. 'It sounded like someone hammering from inside the boot with their fists. I pulled over, and we all got out. I sprang open the boot and jumped back, but there was nothing there. We drove up the road, and it began again.'

'Couldn't it have been some fault with the car?'

'It wasn't that sort of noise. You could feel the vibrations through the back seat. Anyway, it happened again a few nights later. That was the last time we heard it.'

It opened up all sorts of possibilities. I knew only too well that cars were used in the commission of crimes. I wondered if our car had been subject to a particularly nasty one. I was not allowed to carry out any checks in my place of work, so there was no way of knowing. Since the stone-throwing incident the car had not been driving well, often losing power at inconvenient times. Neil took it into the garage many times, and no fault could be found. 'OK,' I said, 'we'll trade in the car for a newer one. You never know, it might help.'

‘We need to talk about the dogs too. It’s not fair leaving them home alone so long,’ Neil said.

‘Leave it with me for now, I’m trying to find someone to take them in.’ I knew Neil hated going back to the house during the day, but I was not ready to give them up just yet. ‘What about the priests? Want to give them a call?’ I said, swiftly changing the subject.

‘I’ve tried. The Catholic Church is in no hurry to help us,’ Neil said, staring at the floor.

‘OK, then we can speak to the Free Church, see if they will help.’

Neil shrugged his shoulders, ‘Whatever you think.’

I could see Neil was dubious. But he was held back by the fear the priest’s attendance would make things worse. I felt that we had nothing to lose.

We visited the Free Church that day. Despite the fact we were not members, they were very sympathetic and offered to visit our home to say some prayers. Their visit was scheduled for the following week, when I had some time off work.

CHAPTER NINE

Searching for Help

I busied myself cleaning on the morning of the priest's visit. The children agreed to stay in their rooms upstairs when the priests arrived. The house was relatively quiet, and we planned for a simple house blessing to take place. Neil's mobile phone rang, and I picked it up. 'Unknown number' flashed up on the screen. 'I'm not answering that,' I said, putting the phone on the fireplace. Seconds later the phone beeped to inform us the anonymous caller had left a message. Tentatively, I played it back. I flinched at the message.

'What is it?' Neil asked. I played the message again on speakerphone so he could hear. It sounded as if it was coming from our house, with our television and voices in the background. Halfway through the call, a high-pitched male voice screamed, 'Fuck the priests!' There were a lot of background noises, but there was no mistaking those sinister words. I sat on the arm of the sofa, unnerved by the feeling the visit was about to backfire. Minutes later a large silver car pulled into the drive. I licked the dryness from my lips as a nervous feeling fluttered in the pit of my stomach.

We welcomed the priests as they walked in the front door. They arrived casually dressed and made their introductions. A young dark haired man asked us to call him *Matthew. He was well spoken, and I guessed he was in his early thirties. The second priest shook hands and introduced himself as *Peter. He had a crop of blonde hair and appeared the more experienced of the two. The only sign of their vocation was a leather bound bible, which Peter carried in his hand.

Peter walked into the house with an air of authority and Matthew followed

behind him. They seemed confident they could help, and we expressed our gratitude for their attendance.

Neil confided he felt like a leper as people were avoiding us for fear of ‘catching’ the entity, like it was some kind of illness. He did not blame them; it was just another example of how our lives had been affected.

I played the voice message back to the priests. Solemnly, they agreed the words appeared to be directed towards them.

Peter opened his bible and recited a short prayer, relinquishing any permission for the entity to be in our home. They explained that, by Neil first asking the entity to perform, he had inadvertently given it permission to come into our lives. It made sense, and Neil was very keen to revoke any perceived permission that he had given. The words had just left his mouth when Neil’s phone began to ring.

‘Look. The screen is reading home,’ I said, pointing it out. The priests exchanged glances as both our mobiles and the house phone rang persistently.

‘I’ll put it on speaker phone,’ Neil said, reaching for the home phone and handing it to them. Peter did not flinch. A rasping, exhaling sound could be heard on the other side. Peter said a prayer and the breathing continued. ‘You do not have permission to be here,’ the priest said with conviction. ‘In the name of Jesus Christ, leave this innocent family now.’ The line went dead. Peter prayed over the phone while walking into the kitchen, and then left it on the side. We walked to the hall to pray and returned to the kitchen shortly after.

I opened the kitchen door and stopped in my tracks. The home phone was in a standing position in the middle of the kitchen floor. Was this a message from the entity, demonstrating he was not going anywhere? The priest picked up the phone and examined it. He appeared at a loss for words. We all knew nobody had been in the kitchen in the short time we were gone. We returned to the living room and sat down. ‘Do you think it’s gone?’ I asked Neil,

praying he would say yes.

Neil sighed. ‘No it’s still with me. I can feel it. I just hope nothing else happens.’

I tried to understand what Neil meant. ‘How do you know? Are you sure it’s not your imagination?’

Neil shook his head. ‘It’s hard to explain. It’s like a sick, nervous feeling that grows, from the pit of my stomach. Then it feels heavy, like it’s on me. I know when it comes and I know when it goes. It’s with me now.’ Again, the priests exchanged glances.

Peter slammed his bible shut and walked towards the door, keen to leave. ‘It’s best if you visit us at the church in future, rather than have us attend your home. I’m afraid we aren’t equipped to deal with it. You should give the Catholic Church another call about organising an exorcism.’

‘Thanks for coming anyway,’ I said, reaching out to shake their hands.

‘Say lots of prayers and attend church, have faith in God,’ Peter said over his shoulder as he walked out to their car parked on our drive.

Neil and I returned inside as their car drove away. I couldn’t help but feel disappointed. ‘What did you think of that?’ I asked.

‘Nice blokes, but they couldn’t get away quick enough,’ Neil said, flatly.

I stood staring out the front window long after the priests left. The shrill ring of our house phone interrupted my thoughts. Anger grew inside me. Neil’s phone lit up once again with the words ‘home’ flashed across the display. ‘Leave us alone,’ I murmured under my breath, covering my ears to block out the sound. Frustration built towards the unknown caller. My mobile phone began to ring insistently, stating ‘home’ was calling. I turned off my phone and shoved it back into my pocket. The calls persisted. On and on the phones rang, taunting us. ‘Right, that’s it, I’ve had enough!’ I shouted. I answered the call, and was greeted with a strange distorted noise, like someone playing a record and rubbing it back and forward on a turntable. The call went dead and I put the phone on the side, my hands trembling with

anger.

‘What was it?’ Neil asked, putting his hand on my shoulder.

‘I don’t know. It was some strange rubbing noise. I can’t describe it.’

Neil’s phone rang and he pressed the speaker button as he answered. A gravelly voice abruptly blurted out ‘Neil!’

Furious, I grabbed the phone and clutched it to my ear. ‘Who is this?’ I shouted. Neil hunched over me, listening for the response. A demonic snarl ripped loudly through the phone. My heart froze, unprepared for the ferocity. The snarl ended in an inhuman vomiting noise. It was concentrated evil and directed solely at me. Ice-cold fear ran through my veins. I wanted to drop the phone and run, but I had to act. I began to recite the Lord’s Prayer down the phone. ‘Our Father who art in heaven…’ I continued, struggling to breathe. I was on a direct line to the entity and it took all my strength to continue. ‘Hallowed be thy name…’ My breath hitched as I broke into a sob. The line went quiet, but I felt an evil presence all around me. I finished the prayer and the line went dead. I heaved to take a breath, ‘Neil… get the kids out… we’re leaving.’ I ran into the hall, grabbing the children’s bags as I did so. I tried to shout for them to come downstairs, but it came out as a warbled scream. I knew I had to calm down, but I could not breathe. For once I felt what Neil felt.

Neil stood beside me and helped me out to the car. ‘Slow your breathing, you’re having a panic attack.’ The children jumped into the car without question. One look at my face was enough to tell them this was serious. *What the hell are we dealing with? If the priests can’t get rid of it what hope do we have?*

‘Where will we go?’ Neil asked.

‘Just drive,’ I answered between breaths, desperate to get away from the house.

‘I’ll drive to the Free Church, we can tell them what’s happened.’

I tried to calm down, not wanting to scare the children. We drove to the

church, but our knocks went unanswered. Neil and I stood outside while the children waited in the car. I turned my mobile phone on and rang the church, but there was no response. I left a message, trying to explain.

'What now?' Neil said.

I was spent. 'I don't know. I'm not going back there tonight. Let's go to Clacton.'

We later realised we fled the house leaving our doors and windows open. Neil briefly returned to secure it. That night I understood why Neil had difficulty sleeping. I never truly appreciated just how horrendous the calls were until I heard one for myself. I turned and twisted in the sofa bed, counting the hours to dawn.

We returned to the house a couple of weeks later, in the hope of staying the night. Neil's parents were missing their own space, as well as peace and quiet. I felt torn, but willing to give it a try. I hoped the entity would give us some respite as it did in the past. The children clambered upstairs to reacquaint themselves with their computer games and toys. I busied myself cleaning up in the kitchen. I stiffened upright as the home phone rang in the background.

Neil joined me in the kitchen as he answered it. I knew he rushed to answer the phone to protect me from the noises.

'It's OK, it's Lee,' he said, taking his pack of cigarettes from his pocket. I fought the urge to join him, and hoped Lee was not planning a visit. I liked him, but it seemed like every time they were together things got worse.

Neil stood at the back door chatting to Lee about meeting up in the pub. He paused mid-sentence. 'Lee, can you hear that breathing noise?'

I stared at Neil, listening in to their conversation.

'Can't you hear it? It's very loud,' Neil said.

Curious, I walked over and put my ear to the handset to listen in. Instead of hearing Lee's voice, a loud gravelly voice snarled, 'Get ouuut.' I backed away from Neil and rubbed my ear. I felt invaded. The voice was much

louder than Lee's, and sounded nothing like him. Was this the voice of the entity?

'Lee did you hear that?' Neil asked, searching for answers. It appeared Lee did not. 'I'm going now, I can still hear it breathing.' Neil abruptly ended the call and put the phone back in its cradle. 'This is getting way too much,' Neil said. 'If this thing can speak, what's it going to do next?'

I shuddered. *If this thing comes from a different time in the past, how could it use technology?* It was one of the many unanswered questions that spun in my mind. I walked upstairs to check on the children. Joe was out walking the dogs. Sarah looked at me uneasily. 'Please Mum, can we stay for another while, at least until it gets dark?' she said, pre-empting my suggestion to leave. I shrugged, not knowing what to do anymore. Later that day a picture fell over on the mantelpiece. It could have fallen over of its own accord, but I could not relax. The voice on the telephone was playing in a loop in my mind, and I was constantly on my guard. I was too scared to go to the bathroom in our house. The thought of being alone in a confined space scared the hell out of me. Neil was also uneasy. We settled the dogs, decided against sleeping at home, and returned to Clacton.

The following Sunday we went to church to see Father Luke. There had been no word back from the church, although we attended the Catholic service regularly. At the end of the service I shook hands with the priest. 'Things aren't very good Father,' I whispered.

He smiled and placed his hand on mine 'Ah well, at least it has brought you back to the church,' he replied. He removed his hand and extended it to the next person in line.

I was flabbergasted. He truly did not appreciate the seriousness of the situation. I opened my mouth to reply, but was ushered out the door by the sea of people behind me.

We returned to the house a few days later and tried to be positive. The television was turned on, we played music in the kitchen and did everything

we could to lift the mood. The day passed smoothly with no unusual occurrences. I unplugged the house phone and pulled out the children's mattresses onto our bedroom floor. Everything was done with military precision as I planned our escape route. The light was left on in the landing, dressing gowns were close to hand, and our bags were packed at the front door in case we needed to make a quick escape.

Lying in bed staring at the ceiling, I remembered my childhood, when I worried about the bogeyman under the bed. I grew up with my family living beside a canal. My mother used to say there was a bogeyman there so I would not be tempted to mess about in the water. I was not a very good swimmer, and the unguarded canal was deep in the middle. The only problem was that the bogeyman would also play on my mind when I went to bed. My concerns ended when I started school and common sense prevailed.

I rubbed my eyes. *It's funny what goes through your head when you can't sleep.* I wished I had a fast forward button I could press to bring on the dawn.

The next day a few small things happened in the house and we tried to ignore them as we watched TV. My mobile phone delivered its familiar ringtone, which stated my husband was calling. The problem was Neil was sitting right beside me, and his mobile phone was lit up on the fireplace ringing all by itself. I silently turned the phones off, afraid if I acknowledged the incident I would somehow encourage more. Our plan of ignoring it seemed to be working reasonably well, but I was dreading the night and asked if we could sleep in Clacton one more time.

There was more heartache to come as we were forced to rehome the dogs. I tried without luck to ask family and friends to foster them until the situation improved. Unfortunately, I did not know how long that would take. Nobody had space indefinitely. We could not afford to leave them in kennels for weeks on end, and I knew I had hung on to them too long. We made the difficult decision to rehome them.

It was heartbreaking explaining it to the children, and I strongly resented

being put in such a position. I made enquiries and reluctantly rehomed our dogs on the same day. It was a plaster – I had to pull it off quickly to endure the pain in one go. Lara was left until last, the most loyal of all our dogs. I dropped her off and strode back to my car, her whines still ringing in my ears. A pang of guilt hit me; she would find it hard to settle without us. I sat inside the car and bowed my head against the steering wheel of the car. *What have I done?* Resentment cut through me like a knife.

I returned to Clacton, and went back online to find help. My nerves were shattered, and I was desperately tired. I found Mike Hallowell, an investigator in Newcastle. He seemed very knowledgeable about poltergeists and his website stated he had been investigating hauntings for decades. 'I know he lives far away, but maybe if I email him he might know somebody local who can help,' I said to Neil as my fingers clacked furiously on the keyboard. I wrote the whole story to date in the email.

Neil glared at the screen. 'You've written loads.'

'He might as well know everything,' I said.

Neil bit his thumbnail. 'It might be too much information, you might put the man off.'

I pressed send. 'It's gone now. Let's just wait and see.' Neil need not have worried. Mike replied instantly and asked if he could follow it up with a phone call. As the phone rang I passed it over to Neil 'You know more than I do Neil, you talk to him.'

Neil went to the kitchen and sat at the table beside the open window, trying to light a cigarette as he chatted with Mike on the phone. I took the cigarette from his hands, lit it and passed it back to him. I lit another cigarette for myself and inhaled deeply, giving into the craving I had fought for so long. As the story unfolded I heard things Neil had not disclosed to me. He was bearing the brunt of the attacks in order to protect his family. I toyed with Neil's cigarette lighter as we both sat at the kitchen table, my gaze on the streets below. Holidaymakers walked past, laughing and joking with each

other as their children tagged behind. What I would give for an ordinary life I thought as Neil recounted the physical injuries he suffered to Mike.

CHAPTER TEN

The Investigators

Neil and Mike kept in contact and several phone calls passed between them during the week. We stayed in Clacton, and I was helping Valerie make dinner when Neil walked into the kitchen, looking pleased with himself. Lately he did not seem to have a lot to smile about. I eyed him curiously. ‘Everything alright?’

Neil nodded. ‘Yep, I‘ve just got off the phone with the investigators. It’s all arranged, they’re coming next week.’

A nervous feeling fluttered in the pit of my stomach as a mixture of relief and apprehension spread through me. ‘I don’t know if we’re doing the right thing. What if they try and blame you for it all? We’ve been through enough without having suspicion cast on us.’

Neil shrugged. ‘We’ve got to try. Isn’t that what you have been telling me?’

‘I know, but if we find it difficult to comprehend, how can we expect strangers to believe us?’

‘We won’t know if we don’t try.’

I watched him slowly amble into the living room. Neil was a shadow of his former self, and I did not want him to suffer any more. I had to measure that against our desperate need to get rid of the cause of our misery. People I barely knew approached me to ‘Come and have a look,’ for their own entertainment. I hoped the investigators’ priority would be to help. Our house was not a Disney Haunted Mansion. It was our home, and our privacy was being invaded. Not least of all by the worst intruder, the paranormal kind. I

thought of when I attended burglaries at work. I sympathised with the householders who, through their tears, would tell me how they felt so invaded, to know a stranger had been in their home as they slept. It was not very different from what was happening to our family, except we had little support. Our intruder was unwelcome, uninvited, and always there.

The arranged day came quickly, and we returned home to wait for Mike and his team. It felt strange visiting my own home, the comforting familiar smells were gone, and without the children's laughter it seemed like a cold empty shell. Even the kitchen was stale and downcast. The family moments we shared seemed so far away as a feeling of oppression took its place. I put the kettle on for tea and coffee, and tried to make the house as welcoming as I could. I wondered what they would have up their sleeves. It was not as if they had a Ghostbusters' type trap that they could open, entice the entity inside and contain it.

I waited in the living room with Neil, Lee, Valerie, and Mark. Some of my friends, also Police Officers, were attending later, as was Neil's brother Stuart who was travelling from London. It would be quite a gathering. 'What do you think they will be like?' I asked, while peering out the window.

Lee gave us one of his dazzling smiles, showing off a row of perfect white teeth. 'Probably very weird professor types, with mad frizzy hair. More than likely wearing sandals… and… a dickey bow,' he said, his description complete.

I smiled and rolled my eyes, glad Lee was there to lighten the mood. 'Yeah but what if they want us to do all kinds of strange stuff? I'm not doing any Ouija boards!'

Neil joined in, 'They won't need to, they'll probably walk in and say, 'woo I see dead people!''

I walked away from the window, fiddling with the chain around my neck. 'No doubt they are also hoping they have not driven all the way from Newcastle to meet a bunch of weirdoes who are imagining things.'

Neil stood up as the headlights of a car flashed through our front window. ‘Well now is the time to find out. Here they are.’

I followed Lee and Neil outside to greet the investigators. They stretched their limbs, stiff from the five-hour journey. Mike walked towards us, extending his hand. Casually dressed in jeans and a shirt, his face creased in a smile. I guessed he was in his fifties by the strands of grey running through his dark hair, tied in a low ponytail at the back. At about 5 ft 6 he was somewhat shorter than Neil, but sturdy in stature. He looked thoughtful as Neil pointed upwards, explaining the direction of the stones when they fell from the sky.

A younger, bearded man introduced himself to me as John Triplow, and the blonde lady beside him as his partner Kelly. They were also dressed casually in jeans and sweaters. They firmly shook me by the hand, and I instantly relaxed in their company.

Neil showed Mike the pieces of brick lodged in the guttering high on the roof. John and Kelly brought their equipment inside and set it up. I busied myself making refreshments while Mike began by filling in a questionnaire with Neil.

‘I don’t want you to worry. We don’t expect to see much tonight as these things often avoid us,’ Mike said, in his broad Newcastle accent.

We did not want them to have a wasted visit. It was our greatest wish that this thing left us alone for good. Having people who believed us would be a bonus.

It did not take long for things to start happening. The phone calls began with my mobile playing its ring tone, stating my husband was calling. I took it from the fireplace to show the caller display to Mike. Neil went to the kitchen and brought out his phone. He put it on the table beside mine and Mike answered the call. Background noises echoed in the distance, and after a few seconds, the call cut off.

‘Hmm. That’s strange,’ Mike said, tapping his clipboard with his pen, ‘I

could hear our voices in the background.' Unperturbed, he made a note of the call and continued his paperwork. Half an hour later my phone rang again, displaying Neil as the caller. This time Neil's phone was resting on the arm of the chair where Mike was sitting. Mike answered the call to hear the same background noises. He tried to end the call with great difficulty. The call would not terminate. Eventually the mysterious caller hung up the phone.

Neil recounted his experiences to Mike. He brought him out to the kitchen and demonstrated how the cooker hob had been moved weeks before. He also showed Mike the site of a small fire on the work surface, which started on its own. The surface was slightly raised and damaged as a result. Later that night the hob moved again, the cause of the movement was unknown.

Evening closed in and John called me outside. 'Caroline, was this window open?' he asked pointing up to David's bedroom window on the second storey.

I frowned. 'No. Nobody is allowed to open the window, we wouldn't want David to climb out onto the ledge and fall.'

John checked the photos he had taken when they arrived and could see the window had been closed. Odd things continued throughout the night. Stones were thrown in the back garden, mysterious breezes wafted past, and coins hit the floor. It was minor compared to events that had been occurring previously.

Neil said he could feel the entity's presence. Static electricity filled the air. It was always a sign that something bigger was to come. At four o clock in the morning Neil walked into the living room and winced.

'You alright?' I asked.

'I don't know. Can you check my back? It feels like it's burning.' Lifting the back of his polo shirt, Neil exposed an area that was red, but not bleeding.

I wondered if the entity was suppressing its activity in front of the investigators, who were preparing to leave. I felt things went well and was happy with the visit. They assured me they would be in touch, and as they

were armed with the facts, they would be able to work out a plan of action. It was half four in the morning. Things died down in the house, and after a cup of tea, most of our visitors had left for home.

Neil's brothers Stuart and Mark, as well as Lee, decided to stay with us and get a couple of hours sleep. As we made our way upstairs an object whistled past us and bounced against the floor downstairs. 'Did you see that?' Neil asked. He made his way back down and bent down at the foot of the stairs to inspect the missile.

'What is it Neil?' I joined him, not wanting to leave his side.

Neil held the object up, 'It looks like a piece of slate. I wonder where that came from.' Another ping reverberated in the hall as a five pence piece landed sharply on the wooden floor at Neil's feet.

I could not believe it. Had the entity been waiting all this time for Mike to leave? 'Neil, let's go back to Clacton. I don't feel comfortable staying here anymore.' My grip on his forearm made clear how unnerved I was.

'We don't want to disturb the kids. It'll be bright in a couple of hours; we can get some sleep and go back then.' Neil smiled, patting my hand.

I did not appreciate his dismissal, but kept my thoughts to myself.

His brother Mark gave him a shifty look, 'Err, I need to use the toilet. Neil will you come upstairs with me?' Neil dutifully followed him up and waited outside the unlocked door. I stood with Neil, hoping he would stand guard for me after Mark was finished. A few minutes later, Mark came out looking shaken.

'Are you all right?' Neil asked as the colour drained from Mark's face.

'It's weird. I was in the bathroom when a bottle of bleach made a whooshing noise as if someone had squeezed it.' Mark's eyes darting nervously around the landing, 'Then the bath made a thudding noise like someone was sitting inside it.'

I knew one thing for certain. I certainly did not feel like using the toilet anymore.

Stuart and Mark walked into Joe and David's bedroom, hoping to put the events behind them and rest. I entered our bedroom with Neil and lay on top of the duvet.

Mark shouted out 'Neil, can you come here a minute?'

'You're not leaving me on my own,' I said, jumping up off the bed to follow him. We walked in to see Stewart pointing at the blinds, which were swaying by themselves. They did not look as if they were going to stop. I walked over to check the window, which was still closed. I glared at Neil to convey it was time to leave, but he ignored it.

'It's just a breeze.'

The windows were double-glazed, and I knew he did not believe it was a breeze any more than I did. 'Let's go back downstairs for a while until we know this has stopped,' I suggested. We walked out to the landing, unsettled and nervous. An object hit the carpet beside us.

'It's a pen,' Neil said, while the rest of us scuffled down the stairs as quick as we could. Sitting in the living room, the air felt thick with anticipation of what might come next. I willed morning to come quicker. *Bang.* A thundering noise came from upstairs. It sounded like huge, furious fists hammering on the walls. The walls of the house shook as the vibrations spread like an aftershock. *Bang, Bang, Bang,* it went, an invisible wrecking ball hitting the walls of our home. My heart began to hammer, and I grabbed on to Neil's arm.

'That's really loud!' Stuart stared at the ceiling open-mouthed. 'What is it?' He began to pace, seemingly unsure of what to do.

'It's him! He's angry because we've had the investigators down,' Neil said. 'I'm going upstairs to check it out,' he said, pulling away from me.

I grabbed his arm tighter, panic rising in my voice 'Don't go upstairs Neil,' I pleaded. I was terrified at what may await him.

'It's okay; I'm not going on my own.'

As Neil and the others marched up the stairs, I realised I was being left

behind. ‘Hang on, don’t leave me here alone.’ Mark turned and stayed downstairs with me. It was taking all my strength not to run out the door. We listened anxiously at the foot of the stairs.

Neil, Lee, and Stewart checked the upstairs bedroom and all was quiet. Neil called Mike to update him and followed the others back downstairs. Just as they made their way into the living room, the noises began again. *Bang.* It sounded like someone dropping heavy weights on the floors above. *Bang.* The coffee cups on the glass table downstairs tinkled in response. The noises were so loud Mike could hear them in the background. Neil put Mike on speaker. Mike’s voice grew terse as he said the entity had been playing games with him all along. After four loud bangs, everything died down. We sat around for a while waiting to see what would happen next. After half an hour, Lee decided to go home.

Mark and Stuart said they just wanted some sleep and Neil agreed. ‘I think he’s run out of steam. Why don’t we try to get some kip? It is nearly morning. We can go back to Mum’s soon,’ he said, yawning.

I was not so keen. My stomach was still churning from earlier events. ‘I don’t want to stay here Neil, there’s no way I’ll be able to sleep now.’

Neil began walking up the stairs, weary. ‘Look, it’s all died down now. If it starts up again we will leave, I promise,’ he said, in his most reassuring tone.

‘I'm going to hold you to that,’ I reluctantly followed him up the stairs. As I climbed into bed, Neil looked at me with amusement, ‘You’re not coming to bed with your shoes on, are you?’

I was fully clothed and intended on staying that way. I must have looked a sight, with the duvet pulled up to my neck and my trainers sticking out of the side of the bed. ‘Too right they’re staying on. I want to be ready in case we need to leave in a hurry.’

Neil smiled, undoing the buckle on his jeans. ‘But you’ll wait for me to get dressed if anything happens… Won't you?’

I responded with a withering look, which told him he was on his own. I fell into the familiar pattern of not wanting Neil to fall asleep, leaving me the only person in the house awake. I listened to the birdsong as dawn broke, squeezing my eyes shut and pulling the duvet up further to my chin in an effort to feel safe. I jolted when Neil's mobile phone rang.

Neil opened his eyes and blinked. He picked up the phone from the bedside table and looked at the display. 'Unknown number,' he whispered. He put the phone to his ear.

'Who is it?' I asked, now bolt upright. 'Nobody, just silence.'

I was beginning to hate that ring tone. It made my flesh creep. Just as Neil hung up, a mobile phone rang from the children's bedroom. Simultaneously the home phone rang. Neil ignored them. We held our breath as a faint knock echoed on our bedroom door.

'Are you decent?' the voice said. It was Mark.

We exhaled in relief. 'Yeah, come in,' Neil said. Mark did a double take at my trainer-clad feet sticking out of the bed. 'My phone just rang, but when I went to answer, it displayed unknown number,' Mark said.

I could tell he was wondering if sleeping in the house was such a good idea after all. I turned to Neil with a knowing look. 'Can we go now? You said…' My sentence hung in mid-air as Neil rose from the bed.

He looked at me and uttered the words I wanted to hear, 'Let's go.'

I was out of the bedroom like a shot, at the front door waiting before Neil could get his shoes on. We drove to Clacton in silence as Mark and Stewart followed behind. I felt exhausted, physically and emotionally drained. I knew it would not be very long until the children were awake. We crept into the rooms so as not to disturb the sleeping occupants. Stewart and Mark took the sofa bed in the living room, while Neil and I slept in the spare room with the children. There was not a lot of room, but we managed to squeeze in between the children on the floor. I took my shoes off and lay on the carpeted floor.

Neil scratched his head. 'Any pillows?' he whispered.

I closed my eyes, beyond caring. ‘Dunno. Use your coat,’ I murmured, already drifting off. I could have been lying on a bed of nails for all I cared. I gave in to exhaustion as my body fell into sleep.

The investigators came and went several times, gathering evidence. Mike was always willing to listen, and had a calm and easy manner that reassured Neil throughout. But their friendship was tested when it became apparent the investigators had growing suspicions of Lee. I knew they had to investigate every aspect and seek out rational explanations, but Neil was very hurt. As far as Neil was concerned, Lee stood by him from the very start, and was a good friend. He was very defensive of anyone casting doubt, and I admired his loyalty. Neil believed the entity was trying to make it look as if Lee was responsible for the attacks.

It certainly looked that way when the investigators were around. Whenever Lee went into a room or upstairs on his own, something happened. Whenever he was the last to leave the room, something was thrown. Noises came from his direction. It only happened when the investigators were around, or before people who came to ‘have a look’ for the first time. There were countless paranormal occurrences when Lee was not even in the house, and things were often thrown at Lee from thin air. The trouble was that the investigators were not always there to see it. I felt their suspicion also implied that Neil and I could be involved in the deception, or we were extremely naïve. I made a living out of investigating offences and felt annoyed that someone could doubt our validity, even if only briefly.

The investigators visited often, although the distance made it difficult. The more they attended the more activity they witnessed. It seemed as if the entity had given up trying to ‘frame’ Lee for what happened, and Neil felt happier their doubts were fading away. Eventually suspicion against Lee subsided completely. Any living person, including Lee, could not have orchestrated the activity they witnessed.

The next time they arrived, they had a chat with Lee to clear the air.

Although Lee was upset by the accusations, there were no hard feelings. Lee understood that by looking at him closely, the investigators were only doing their job.

It was an active month. We continued to stay in Clacton at night, and returned home during the day. We became accustomed to objects moving on their own. The entity seemed to evolve from one party trick to another, each one more powerful than the last. I urged Neil to speak to the priests. The Catholic Church and their failure to support us disillusioned him. Instead, we returned to the Free Church and attended a service. They were always sympathetic and understanding, although limited in their capabilities.

Dressed in their Sunday best, the children skipped up the flower-lined street in front of me. It was a beautiful hot day, and good to be outside. Parishioners nodded and smiled as we walked up the steps to the large double doors. I ushered the children into the pew at the back of the church, and a hush descended as the service began. I hoped it would provide us with some comfort.

Halfway through the service, Neil shifted uncomfortably in his seat. ‘What’s wrong?’ I whispered. I became very aware of the other parishioners around us.

Neil grimaced as he whispered. ‘He’s here. I can feel him. My back is burning.’

I stared at him in surprise. This was not meant to happen. Then again, this thing did not play by the rules. We stood as the hymns began. I leaned into Neil and whispered, ‘Do you want to go?’

Neil winced as he rubbed the back of his neck. ‘I’ll stay as long as I can.’ We waited until the offering and snuck out. The children raced each other to the car, oblivious to Neil’s distress.

‘Do you want to speak to the priests?’ I asked.

‘What’s the point?’ Neil slumped his head. The question lingered unanswered in the air as we walked towards the car.

A few days later I cleaned the house while the children played upstairs. I was struggling to adjust from a person who had never experienced the paranormal, to having full blown encounters. Keeping my mind on the housework seemed a good method of distraction. Work was intermittent for Neil, and he was spending more and more time at home. Trotting up the stairs, I realised I needed the clothes basket in the kitchen. I turned and swivelled to go back down. Gasping in surprise I felt something rush towards me, its energy thick and heavy. 'Oh!' I grabbed the banisters tightly as something passed through me. It was like the thickest cobwebs, but nothing could be seen. *What just happened?* The pungent smell of rotten cabbage lingered in the air. I cupped my hand over my nose and mouth in disgust. I stepped forward, and it was gone. I took a step back and smelt it again. Shaken, I ran down to tell Neil, who was watching TV. 'There was someone on the stairs,' I blurted out.

Neil looked up from where he was sitting and turned to face me. 'What do you mean, what happened?'

I gathered my thoughts. 'It was like someone had been following me quickly up the stairs, and when I turned around, they couldn't stop. For a split second I thought it was you behind me.'

'Did you see anything?'

'No, but I felt it,' I said, hugging myself, 'and there was a terrible smell.' I began to feel upset with the invasion.

Neil put a comforting arm around me. 'I believe you. I'll ring Mike and let him know.'

'No, just leave it,' I said, not wanting to devote any of our thoughts or energy to the subject. I tried to pull myself together and carry on, but the memory of the negative energy refused to let go.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Out of Control

It was a cold September morning when Neil went to the house alone. Everybody else was either at school or at work. He was contemplating what to do with his day when the doorbell rang.

‘Everything OK mate? I tried ringing you on your mobile, but there was no answer,’ Lee said, standing in the doorway.

Neil resorted to leaving his mobile in the house at night. The odd rasping calls were relentless and he’d had enough. ‘Hi Lee, come in, I’ve not been checking my phone. Have a seat in the living room and I’ll make us a coffee.’

Neil walked to the kitchen to boil the kettle and check his messages. He searched for his phone and found it balancing precariously on top of a bottle of water. Neil rubbed the back of his neck as a prickle of worry grew. The back door was locked and his phone had been on the counter minutes earlier. He reached for his phone and slid it in his jeans pocket. *Ping*. A small missile resounded against the back of his head. Neil instinctively crouched, protecting his head with his hands. Twisting around, he glanced to see what was behind him. The object came from behind, and Lee was still in the living room. Neil looked down to see a small piece of dried dog food on the floor. Could that be what hit him? He bent down and picked it up, rolling it between his fingers. It felt about the right size. He scanned the rest of the kitchen floor and it was clean. Neil placed the dog nut on the kitchen counter and returned to the kettle. *Ping*. Something light hit the back of his head. ‘Ah, what now?’ Neil said through gritted teeth.

‘Are you OK Neil?’ Lee shouted.

Neil did not answer. He was engrossed in looking for the missile. Finally he saw it. A tiny crisp piece of cereal lay on the floor. He picked it up just as Lee walked in. Neil tried to explain. ‘I was hit twice on the head. First by a dog nut, and now this.’ He held up the tiny piece of cereal to show Lee. ‘It’s just a rice Krispie,’ Neil said, crushing it between his fingers.

‘Looks like it’s playing games,’ Lee said. ‘Best ignore it.’

Neil agreed, but every time they turned around they were pelted with dried dog nuts or cereal from behind. Someone was taking great amusement in tormenting them, and soon the floor was dotted in cereal. ‘You go first and I’ll follow you out,’ Neil said, planning their retreat. ‘Nothing will happen to you if I’m watching.’ Neil watched Lee walk towards the door. Neil gaped in disbelief as a handful of cereal came from thin air and sprayed Lee on the back of the head.

‘Whoa,’ Lee said. Ducking down, he made a rapid exit through the door.

Neil was right behind him. ‘I can’t believe I just saw that. It came from thin air.’ Curiosity overcame them both, and they slowly returned to the kitchen. ‘Where are they getting it from?’ Neil asked.

Lee pointed into a bowl of dry cereal that the children had left out. ‘It looks like someone has scooped some out from the bowl.’

‘You’re right, it does. We’d better check the dog food then.’ He walked over to the plastic tub used to keep the food fresh. ‘Look. This was flat earlier on. I topped it up and levelled it this morning,’ Neil said. He could clearly see outlines of fingers where they had been scooped out. ‘That’s well creepy,’ Neil said, covering the tub. Neil had mixed reactions about Lee’s presence. He knew that when he was with Lee they often acted as a catalyst for paranormal events, but he did not want to be on his own in the house. An uncomfortable feeling rose in the pit of his stomach. As they turned to walk out to the living room Neil scanned the kitchen one more time. He noticed the toaster was turned on, and unplugged it from the wall. His nostrils were filled with a pungent smell, like rotting cabbage. ‘Awe mate, is that you?’ Neil

gagged as the smell grew stronger.

Lee laughed at being accused of producing something so odious. ‘No it bloody well isn’t. That’s disgusting.’ Neil opened the back door and they both went outside for air.

‘You have to admit, it’s kind of funny… a farting ghost.’ Lee chuckled at the prospect.

Neil couldn’t help but join in. After a few gulps of fresh air they returned to the kitchen. Neil’s eyes flicked to the tea towel, which was now placed neatly on top of the mop bucket. It had been on the kitchen counter seconds previously. Neil ignored the tea towel and began to clean the kitchen. A clicking noise came from the iron on the counter. It was the built in safety feature which turned the iron off to prevent it from overheating. Neil groaned as he unplugged it from the wall and left it on the counter to cool down. He really hated when electrical items became involved. The men retreated to the living room, not bothering to sit down. The nervous feeling in the pit of his stomach told Neil the entity was not finished yet. Within seconds another sound emanated from the kitchen.

Neil walked towards the glowing light coming from the open fridge door. ‘Oh for God’s sake!’ A tin of golden syrup was laying on its side oozing sticky contents down the door of the fridge. ‘This is going to take ages to clean.’ He filled a basin of hot soapy water while Lee kept lookout. Bending down to clean the fridge a sense of doom enveloped him, thick and murky, like the syrup he was trying to scrub away. After five minutes of scrubbing he tipped the dirty water down the sink. Neil made some coffee and returned to the living room to watch TV. Lee said something, but Neil was not listening. He was concentrating on the smell that floated in the air. ‘I think I can smell burning, I’m just going to check the kitchen.’

‘I’ll come with you,’ Lee said, following him through to the kitchen towards the direction of the smell. It was coming from the iron. Not only had it been plugged back in, it was also pushed up against a loaf of bread on the

counter.

‘Ow!’ Neil shouted as he pulled his fingers back from the burning bread wrapper. He unplugged the iron and examined the sticky wrapping, which was stuck fast to the hotplate. ‘Great. It’s ruined. We just bought this a couple of weeks ago.’ He wrapped the cord tightly around the iron and shoved it in a drawer. Neil scowled. It did not seem like he was going to get any peace that day. Satisfied they were safe, he checked the kitchen one more time and joined Lee in the living room.

Neil turned on the television, and ten minutes into the programme, he raised his head and sniffed. *Is that burning?* He burst through the kitchen door. Red flames danced on the toaster at the far end of the kitchen. ‘Ah hell, it’s on fire,’ he shouted. The toaster was plugged back in and turned on. A tea towel was on fire *beside* the toaster. ‘Open the door,’ Neil instructed Lee, ‘I need to throw the towel outside.’

‘This is getting dangerous,’ Lee said, swiftly opening the door. Toasters turning on by themselves could be managed, but this was a deliberate attempt to start a fire. Was this a warning for bigger things to come? Neil shook his head. The towel must have been placed on top of the toaster until it combusted from the source of the heat. Once alight, it was mysteriously placed on the counter. There was no way anyone else could have done this. Lee had not left his side the whole morning. The back door was locked. The garden was surrounded by a six-foot secure fence and wall, which backed out onto a busy road. If anyone were to scale the fence unseen, they would have to force open the back door, light the fire then leave. There was no way someone would break into the kitchen without anyone noticing.

Neil walked outside to check the tea towel on the ground. It was gone. He scratched his head and searched the garden. He found it smouldering on top of a roll of garden membrane leaning up against the wall of the house. Grabbing the towel, he threw it on the ground to put it out. Stamping and swearing, he took out his frustrations on the towel until he felt a little better.

He binned what was left of the towel and wrapped the cord around the toaster, put it in the cupboard and slammed the door shut. Scanning the room, he ensured the rest of the electrical appliances were hidden out of sight. But there was one appliance he could not hide. *Click… Click… Click* went the igniter of the gas hob, followed by a flame, bursting into life. ‘I don’t believe this,’ Neil uttered. He turned around to see the cooker flame alight.

The theme of the day was fire starting, and Neil became increasingly frustrated. He could have just left for Clacton, but as bad as the situation was, he did not want to risk the house burning down. Every time Neil tried to walk out of the kitchen the hob igniter clicked on. He stood back, amazed. It was not the easiest of ovens to figure out. This thing must be smart. ‘Right,’ Neil said, flicking off a red switch on the wall that controlled the electricity source. It was rarely turned off and was extremely stiff. ‘Now try turning that on.’ The click of the red button reverberated in response. ‘Ahh!’ Neil shouted, ‘What am I going to do now?’

Lee stepped forward. ‘I’ve an idea. Have you got a screwdriver? It means disconnecting the supply, but it’s worth it for peace of mind.’ Lee unscrewed the red switch from the wall and disconnected the electrical wires.

Neil bit his fingernail, hoping the entity would not take their reaction as a personal challenge. ‘Hopefully that will be the end of it.’

‘Yeah,’ Lee smiled, ‘he would have to be an electrician to turn that back on.’

Neil nodded, unable to raise a smile. Complacency was not an option. Feeling the need for reassurance, he walked inside to telephone Mike. He pressed the speaker button as he dialled the number. It enabled him to have his hands free in case anything else occurred.

Lee lit a cigarette and walked to the front of the house to smoke it. Smoking inside the house was banned, and there was enough smoke lingering in the kitchen already.

Neil continued talking to Mike while following Lee to the front of the

house.

‘I wouldn’t worry,’ Mike said.’ Fires *can* happen in poltergeist cases, but usually they’re small and extinguish by themselves. The entity would not be powerful enough to light a big fire.’

Neil stood at the front door and glanced around. ‘Do you smell smoke?’ he said to Lee, hoping his neighbour had lit a bonfire.

Lee looked at Neil with confusion as a cloud of smoke billowed past. It was coming from the back of the house. He flashed Neil a look of alarm, then turned on his heel and ran to the back garden, with Neil behind.

Neil prayed he was wrong as a feeling of dread washed over him. They got to the back garden and ran towards the plumes of smoke.

‘Neil, the branches are on fire,’ Lee shouted, referring to the cut trees which Neil accumulated from gardening work weeks previously. Dead tree branches crackled and spit as flames fanned wildly from the trees. Neil froze. He was in the garden minutes earlier, and now a fire was burning out of control. There was no doubt in his mind where it had come from. Neil remembered he was still on the line to Mike. ‘It’s lit a fire, its set fire to the trees at the side of the house.’ Terrified the house would catch alight, Neil shouted to Lee, who was looking for a hose. ‘Fill up the mop bucket, throw some water on it!’

Lee grabbed the bucket and filled it with water. He threw it on the hissing trees, the flames fighting to spread upwards.

Neil pulled the bucket from his hands and held it under the running tap. It was not just the trees that were alight. Lee cycled to Neil’s house that day and his mountain bicycle was ablaze. Thick black smoke fanned from the front tyre, which was melting in the heat.

Lee tried to pull his bike away from the flames. He pressed his hands against the hot handlebars, burning his leg against the flaming tyre in the process. Lee dropped the bike and choked a cough as the smell of burning rubber filled his lungs.

Ever the investigator, Mike instructed Neil to take pictures of the fire.

It was the last thing on Neil's mind. He needed to get the flames out quick. The lawnmower was not far from the trees, and he was scared it would catch alight. He dragged everything out as best he could and finally extinguished the hissing flames. Shaking, Neil wiped his forehead with his blackened arm and stopped to recover his breath. He looked at Lee's hands and leg; they were burnt from handling the bike. 'Are you OK mate, do you need that looked at?'

'No, it's OK,' Lee examined his hands. 'But I've had enough for one day. Can you drop me home?'

Neil obliged, feeling dejected. Lee's bike was ruined and as far as Neil was concerned, Mike's theory of poltergeists not being able to start big fires had been disproved. He returned to the house alone and exhausted. Neil made himself a coffee and tried to contemplate what had occurred. Nursing his cup, he recalled Mike asking where Lee was when the fire begun. Neil was only about three seconds behind Lee as he went to the front of the house. The fire took place at the back. A high wall and a stiff wooden gate enclosed the back garden. For Lee to be responsible he would have had to run past Neil, through the house, light the fire, then run back to the front. The other option was going down the side alleyway through the stiff gate, around to the other side of the property, light the fire then run back around to the front of the house – all in a three second time frame. It was impossible. *So why did Mike ask where he was?* Thoughts of worry and concern clawed their way into Neil's mind. *Did Mike suspect Lee of trying to set fire to his house? To the home of a Police Officer?* It was ludicrous. *But what if people thought they were both responsible… what if…* Neil shook the thoughts away. It was not the first time irrational thoughts filled his head, and lately they were becoming more and more frequent.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Firefighters

Neil called me at work to update me about the fire. It added to the mountain of stress, which was overwhelming me. Drowning in a sea of despair, I could see no help in sight.

I hung up the phone and put my head in my hands. *How am I going to get through another two hours at work?* I walked to my locker and opened a pack of cigarettes that I kept for emergencies. Standing outside at the back of the station, I inhaled the cigarette, allowing the guilty pleasure to overcome me. I kept busy and finally it was time to go home.

The children were setting the table for a takeaway Neil had just bought. I said hello and headed straight out for the trees. My priority was to investigate the charred remains of the fire before it got dark.

Neil followed behind and pointed to the leaves, his brow furrowed. ‘I don’t think anyone could have started the fire so quickly, even if they wanted to. It’s got to be him.’

I knew Neil was referring to our tormentor, but did not want to readily accept the entity was responsible. ‘Well there’s one way to find out. Give me your lighter.’

‘But what if the fire starts again?’

‘It won’t. Call it a controlled experiment,’ I said, eyeing the bucket of water nearby. I held my breath as I flicked the lighter, holding the flame under the driest leaf. There was no reaction, not even a spark. The flame went out and I tried again.

‘Ow,’ I said, pulling back my fingers from the hot flint. I shook my hand

and tried again, and again. Nothing. I could not even burn a leaf, let alone the branches. ‘Give me your cigarette,’ I beckoned to Neil.

‘I don’t think it’s a good idea you starting up again.’

I rolled my eyes. ‘Not for smoking silly, I want to see if I can light the trees.’

‘Oh, why didn’t you say so? Here, let me try. I don’t want an inferno on my hands,’ Neil held the lit cigarette to the leaf, trying to burn a hole. Apart from a small circular burn it would not take light.

I noticed something odd on the ground and bent down for a closer look.

‘Neil, have you seen this?’ I said, pointing to some soot.

Neil joined me and gazed at the ground. ‘That’s weird. Where’s that come from?’

‘It looks like a diamond shape.’ I touched the soot with my finger and examined the smudge on my skin. ‘Hmmm. This is strange. The soot is in little granules.’ The marking was also several feet from the fire. I stood up and walked over to the charred bicycle. ‘I wonder if it happened when the bike was moved,’ I said as I wheeled the bike on the gravel, pressing the burnt tyre hard against the ground.

‘I can’t see how the tyre could have made a perfect diamond shape. In fact, it’s not making any mark at all, is it?’ Neil said. I gave up trying and wondering if the diamond shape was of significance.

We sat with the children eating our Chinese takeaway. Halfway through I pushed mine away, my appetite lost. I massaged my temples, to ease a growing headache.

The children brought their plates to the kitchen and Neil leaned forward, ‘Mike has suggested calling the fire brigade.’

‘That’s not a bad idea,’ I replied, ‘I’ll give them a call tomorrow. Let’s see if they can work out the cause. We need to keep an open mind,’ I whispered.

Neil nodded in reply as Alice walked into the room.

I masked a smile as I stood up to give her a hug, ‘C’mon, we’re staying in

Nanny's tonight.'

The next day I returned to the area when I noticed two small wooden sticks in the shape of a cross. I kicked the twigs apart and forgot about them, until later that day when I returned to find them back in the same position. Four stones lay nearby, in a diamond shape. *Does it mean anything? Witchcraft maybe?* I tutted at my thoughts which were running away in wild abandon. *Get a grip woman, you're just being paranoid.* I made the call to the fire station hoping someone would make a discreet visit.

I cringed when a big red fire engine parked up outside our drive.

'What are you going to say?' Neil asked, digging his hands into his jeans pockets.

'Well I'm not telling them about the ghost if that's what you think. Just let me do the talking,' I said, walking towards the door.

Two firefighters in full uniform stood at the door. I thanked them for attending so promptly and led them through the house to the back garden. Discussing my concerns about the fire, I mentioned I was a Police Officer and asked them to check for signs of arson. It was a fair point, and I waited in anticipation as they looked through the debris. They could not find any cause for the fire. No sign of any accelerant and nothing to suggest it was lit purposely.

I pushed for an explanation, but there was none. They suggested that perhaps someone threw a lit cigarette butt over our fence as they walked by, which slowly ignited the fire over a period of time. I found this hard to believe.

I looked at our six-foot wooden fence, and then the site of the fire. The ground was clear, with no cigarette butts in sight. Neil smoked at the other side of the house so he could not have been responsible. It was as if the fire started mid way. I fingered the damp leaves. It did not add up, the fire had taken hold in seconds. I kept my thoughts to myself and thanked them for their visit. They tried to reassure me and said I had nothing to worry about.

Nothing to worry about? If only they knew.

The next day Neil spoke to his brother Mark on the phone. I walked into the hall just as he said goodbye. Neil sat on the stairs and stared into space. I stood over him, waiting for him to speak. Silence. I nudged his foot with mine. ‘Neil is you OK?’

Neil turned his head towards me, robotically. I did not like this at all. Lately he had become more withdrawn, and it scared me.

‘Huh? Oh, I’m fine. I was just thinking.’

‘What did Mark say on the phone?’

‘Nothing, he’s just been getting some phone calls, that’s all.’

I climbed the next step on the stairs and sat beside him. I draped my hand over his broad shoulder and gave it a squeeze. ‘C’mon, you can’t keep everything to yourself, what did he say?’

Neil sighed. ‘He’s been getting weird phone calls since it started, but these ones are different, they’re from people trying to sell him stuff.’

‘Well everybody gets those, what’s it got to do with us?’

‘They called Mark, asking to speak to me. He told them it wasn’t my number. They said they had already spoken to me, but I asked them to call them back as I was too upset to talk, due to my house burning down.’

I gasped, trying to take it in. Was it some kind of weird misunderstanding or was the entity orchestrating it all as part of a veiled threat?

Neil continued, ‘Lee’s been getting the same calls.’

‘Who are they? Did he get their details?’

‘That’s the thing, they said they sell life insurance.’

I paused, trying to think of the right words. ‘Neil you can’t shoulder all of this on your own. It’s too much. I know I get scared sometimes, but I can take it. If anything new happens, tell me, then let it go, and don’t dwell on it. No more investigations, let’s just try to live life normally. Keep your feet on the ground and we will be fine.’

Neil patted my hand. ‘OK, I will talk to you in future.’ We rose and he

gave me a hug, sealing his promise.

The following week Mike called, his voice breathless with excitement. ‘You’re not going to believe this. Remember that piece of writing you found with D08 on it?’

‘Yes, what about it?’ Neil replied, pressing the speaker button so I could listen in.

Mike continued, ‘I knew I had seen it somewhere before. I went back and looked through my encrypted files from the South Shields case I investigated, and there it was, a picture of an almost identical piece of writing, D08 as written on their doodle board.’

I recalled Mike mentioning the South Shields case previously, and how they received messages on a child’s magnetic doodle board. If both messages were the same, what did it mean?

Mike was still talking. I brought my focus back to the conversation.

‘And the hairs stood up on the back of my neck when I had seen it. This is real proof; the original image has never been published.’

It was pretty amazing by anyone’s standards. ‘Do you know what the writing means?’ Neil asked, fully engaged in the conversation.

‘No mate, but must mean something as it’s been written in both places. Do you realise we could be dealing with the same entity involved in the South Shields case?’ Mike sounded amazed by the possibilities.

‘Well yes…’ Neil began to say as Mike interrupted him with his news.

‘I’ve started writing a book. Yours is the worst case of infestation I’ve ever encountered, you should go to the papers with this.’

I left the room as Neil continued with the conversation. I bit my fingernail, wishing everything paranormal would go away. I turned on the television to distract myself but could not focus on the programme. My thoughts kept creeping back to Mike’s telephone call. I knew there had been similarities in both cases, but this was unexpected. An uncomfortable feeling overcame me as I dwelled on the implications.

The following morning I helped Neil get the children to school. I was working a late shift and did not need to go to work until the afternoon. We returned to the house for a few hours before I got ready. I decided to clear my head and go for a walk. An hour later, I was back at the house. I walked into the kitchen to hear Neil on the phone to Mike. Neil shot me a guilty look as it became apparent he was discussing their next visit. I glared at him as he ended the call.

'I'm sorry Neil, but I don't want the investigators here anymore. We need to find another way of dealing with it.'

Neil answered solemnly, 'It's all arranged now; they're coming for two nights in September.'

'And you didn't think to ask me? This is my house too, you know,' I said, overcome with annoyance.

'I know, but Mike has helped me, and I know you don't like talking about it.'

'Neil, you know you can talk to me, but all this… focus… it's not doing any good, can't you see that?'

Neil opened his mouth to speak, but I carried on. 'We need to get back to normal, rather than chasing about after ghosts. You're a grown man, and you need to put your family first. What if the house went on fire with the children inside, how would you feel then?'

Neil waved his hands in the air. 'But who else is going to help us? No one, that's who, nobody else wants to know. At least Mike is trying to help'

'But it's not helping, is it? You're only making it worse and I'm fed up with it.'

'Huh, *you're* fed up? You've no idea what it's been like for me, I need to find out what the hell this thing is,' Neil said.

I stabbed the air with my finger. 'You're playing with fire. What if this thing possesses you? I didn't sign up for this when I married you.'

Neil's voice lowered as he said flatly, 'So you're going to leave me?'

I realised I had gone too far. A lump rose in my throat, and I replied in a small voice, ‘No of course not, but I’m scared. This thing is ripping our family apart, and I don’t know how to stop it.’

Neil walked towards me and put his hands squarely on my shoulders. ‘Look, I’m sorry I arranged the visit without asking you first. Let them come down this time, and if they can’t help I won’t ask them down anymore.’

I shrugged, not believing his promise. ‘Whatever.’ I turned to walk upstairs as Neil’s voice trailed behind me.

‘Where are you going?’

‘Work.’

‘But you’ve got over an hour yet.’

‘I’m going in early… got some paperwork to take care of,’ I lied. I needed space to think. I climbed the stairs to get changed. It was unlike us to fight, and I hated it. I wondered if it was as a result of the stress we were under, or the negative energy that filled the house. I had nothing against the investigators personally, but nobody really knew what we were dealing with or how to get rid of it.

I walked into our room and sat on the bed. *What if Neil did get possessed? What would happen then? Would he end up in some psychiatric unit?* Sighing, I rose to prepare myself for work.

###

I spent hours in the local library in my spare time, researching the house and area. It was rich in history, from witchcraft to suicides, but nothing definite could be found. I decided to overcome my embarrassment and speak with my neighbours.

I approached a little thatched cottage across the road from our house. Judging by the structure with its low front door and tiny windows, I guessed it was one of the oldest houses in our area. Unseen dogs barked a warning as

I strolled down the short paved drive. I rapped the heavy black doorknocker and heard shuffling inside. W *hat on earth am I doing?* I thought, glancing towards the road while tempted to run away.

A tall thin lady opened the door; she appeared in her early sixties. She was dressed in linens and had an air of calmness about her. A flicker of recognition crossed her face, which was framed with her light grey hair. I guessed she had lived in the area all her life.

I took a deep breath. 'Hello, I'm your neighbour, and I'm wondering if you can help me,' I said, flashing a friendly smile to show I was not completely insane. The woman smiled back. Encouraged, I continued. 'I know this is going to sound odd…' *Odd*? *Odd? This is more than odd.* 'I'm having some problems with my house and I was wondering if you know anything about the land on which it is built?' I said, pointing to my house across the road.

The lady tapped her chin with her fingers in thought. 'Oh, right. Well, many years ago there had been lots of disagreements over the land but nothing out of the ordinary. Why do you ask?' she gave me a curious smile.

I squirmed, feeling the heat of embarrassment rise to my face. *Oh just spit it out, she thinks you're crazy now anyway*, my inner voice scolded me. 'I know this is going to sound a bit mad, but our house seems to be haunted,' I said, wishing the ground would swallow me up.

She looked at me with some amusement. 'I see. Well apparently the land near the back of your house used to be a witches' coven years ago. But that's just rumour. You don't believe that do you?'

'After what I've seen I would believe anything,' I replied, looking down at the ground as I shuffled my feet uncomfortably.

'I'm afraid I don't know any more than that.'

'That's OK, thanks for your help anyway,' I said, making a hasty retreat while wondering if there was any connection.

I kicked the gravel in front of me as I walked home. *Surely if you did enough digging anywhere in the UK you would come up with some unusual*

events. There was no point in carrying on.

I made dinner, and sat beside Neil at the kitchen table. Alice's library books sat in front of us ready to be returned when she came home from school. Her library ticket was neatly sandwiched between the books, slightly sticking out. Neil asked me to pass him a drink, and as I did so, he crossed his knife and fork on top of the plate. Neil's gaze returned to his plate and I heard him gasp in surprise.

Alice's library ticket was placed upon his gravy and mash, under his knife and fork. Neil pulled the gravy-coated ticket out with his fingers. We both shook our heads and gave a short laugh. There was nothing else we could do. 'Now *that* was a good trick!' I said, quietly impressed. Sometimes all we could do was laugh.

The weather forecast warned showers and I spent the rest of the day tidying up, starting with our en suite bathroom. Cleaning felt good. It stemmed the flow of worrying thoughts that regularly marched through my brain. I polished the sink until it shone and stopped to admire it. Without warning, I felt a pair of eyes bore into my back, and a heavy feeling of despondency filled the room. Slowly, I turned around to see the figure of a little girl staring at me, her large dark eyes unblinking and full of sorrow. Long brown dishevelled hair framed her pale features, and she stood motionlessly with her hands down by her sides. Dressed in a faded pink dress tied at the front, she was a pitying sight. I clutched my hand to my chest, stepping back to grasp the wall for support. As I blinked, the little girl was gone. I stood in silence, catching my breath. *What the hell just happened?* I walked into the bedroom, cautiously looking around. She was gone. Sympathy filled me. *Who was she? Was she trapped? Looking for help?* There was no malice in her features. I sat on the bed and spoke softly and gently. 'I don't know who you are, but I'd like to help if I can.' Silence. I took a deep breath. 'If there is a loving presence that can help this little girl, please do it now.' I closed my request with a prayer.

Not wanting her image to fade from my memory, I found some paper and sketched a rough picture. She was so different to Alice, my delicate little wisp of a girl. This child had rounder features and was much broader. But why did she choose to show herself to me, and why was she so unkempt?

Neil's response was immediate. 'It's him,' he said, searching for the phone. 'I'll give Mike a ring and tell him.'

I waved my hands in front of me in alarm, 'No no, don't tell anyone. It wasn't him. It was just a little girl. You should have seen her Neil, she didn't want to hurt anyone.'

'That's what he does,' Neil said firmly. 'He's trying to lure you into a false sense of security. I've seen him imitate other people. Don't get sucked in.'

I folded my arms. 'I wish I didn't tell you now. I know what I saw Neil, and you're wrong.'

'Suit yourself,' Neil shrugged, 'I know I'm right.' He picked up the phone and ignoring my request, punched in Mike's number.

'Bloody men,' I muttered under my breath climbing back up the stairs.

###

A two-night trip in September was to prove fruitful for Mike and his co-investigators, John and Trevor. They arrived at the bus terminal, having come from Newcastle. Neil was waiting, to take them on the last leg of the journey.

He extended his hand to each of them, offering warm handshakes as they got off the coach. Neil escorted them to the car, and Mike removed his rucksack to put it in the boot. It was full of equipment, and he complained the straps were biting into his shoulders.

The mood was light and jovial, and the journey passed quickly. An hour later, they walked into the house. Neil's friend Chris knocked at the door, unable to resist the opportunity of witnessing activity for himself. Neil invited him many times, but with his philosophical point of view, he dared

not believe it was true. Chris was in his thirties, a slim man, his short hair peppered with grey. Neil enjoyed their conversations on the meaning of life, and recent incidents gave them lots to ponder on.

Equipment was set up as Neil and I made dinner. It was the least I could do, given they never took a penny for expenses. Mike walked in as Neil turned off the gas cooker. 'I'm glad you're here,' Neil said, scooping the spaghetti and sauce onto each plate. 'Things have been tough since you left.'

Mike did not look surprised to hear it. I emailed him prior to his arrival to say Neil was finding it difficult to cope. Mike stood silently as Neil continued.

'My phone won't stop ringing. It's getting on my bloody nerves. Caroline doesn't like talking about it, but there's no let up,' he said as he glanced at me in the corner, listening intently. It was obvious Neil's nerves were frayed. He blinked overtly as he spoke, and stood as if a heavy weight was on his shoulders. It was painful for me to watch the man I married reduced to such a pitiful state. I left Neil to talk to Mike while I welcomed our neighbor John, a Police Sergeant and colleague, inside. He had visited before and was keen to witness paranormal activity. A jovial man with cropped blonde hair, John was popular with his colleagues and listened to my tales with interest.

Evening drew in, and I turned on the light. It was time to take the children to Clacton. Neil walked to the car with me and opened the car door as the children climbed in. 'Are you staying with them tonight?'

'I'm not sure. I don't know what to do,' I said, feeling torn between staying and going.

'It's up to you love, you can always come back later if you want. Something is bound to happen,' Neil said.

I touched his arm. 'No, I don't want to see anything Neil, I mean I'm worried about leaving *you*.' I was trying hard not to argue, but felt consumed with worry.

Neil gave me a smile, which didn't quite reach his eyes. 'Don't worry

about me, I'll be fine. Ring me later if you like.'

I checked the children were strapped into their car seats, then sat in the car and clicked my own seat belt into place.

'I'll stay in Clacton and ring you later,' I said, starting the engine. As I drove into the night I thought about Neil's growing fascination with the paranormal. I understood his need for validation, but his health was suffering and he seemed oblivious to the dangers. I drove on autopilot, my stomach churning with worry.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Faced With Evil

The activity began with ominous thudding noises in the loft. It was not the first instance of activity in our loft space. Previously Neil discovered the loft hatch open, and after closing it, seven loud thumps reverberated from the ceiling. Neil relayed the incident to Mike, who set up a ‘trigger object’ of a crucifix on the loft floor near the hatch. He later returned to find it had been moved.

Neil, Lee, Chris, and John split up to inspect the children’s rooms upstairs to investigate some shuffling noises. Neil shook his head, unable to trace the source of the noise. The house descended into peace.

That night the lengthy journey from Newcastle began to take its toll on Mike, Trevor, and their co – investigator John Triplow. Awake since five that morning, they agreed to take a break in the living room.

Our neighbour John stood up. ‘Unfortunately I’ve got to go to work now, thanks for having me.’

Neil followed him out to the hall, ‘Sorry you didn’t get to see anything.’

‘Oh I did actually,’ John said, pulling on his jacket. ‘When I looked into the boys’ room upstairs, I saw a white plastic chair flip over by itself.’

Neil admired John’s calmness and gave him a smile. ‘Oh, well have a good night’s work.’

John grinned as he walked out to his car, ‘Yes will do, good luck.’

Neil, Lee, and Chris went outside for a cigarette break, and later returned to the living room to find their three companions asleep.

‘Will you look at that?’ Lee laughed. ‘They’re all asleep. Should I wake

them?’ he asked, approaching Mike Hallowell and John Triplow, who were snoring in unison.

‘No, leave them, let them rest,’ Neil whispered. ‘We can carry on ourselves, and if anything happens we’ll wake them up. Now let’s start in Sarah’s room.’ Neil opened the door and glanced around. Sarah shared with Alice and the age gap was apparent. Rock band posters adorned Sarah’s side of the room while Alice’s side had a distinct Barbie princess feel. They sat on the beds and minutes passed. ‘What time is it?’ Neil whispered.

Chris squinted at his watch in the dim light. ‘We’ve been in here ten minutes. Want to try another room?’

‘Yeah, we’ll try Joe and David’s room next.’ Neil rose from the bed and stretched his legs. David’s red racing car bed took up the furthest corner under the window.

Chris sat on the edge, gazing at the blank television screen in front of him.

Neil and Lee lay top to tail on Joe’s bed on the other side, near the door. The quietness lured Neil into a false sense of security and he began to feel drowsy. He lay his head down and placed his hands behind his head. A five pence piece hurtled in his direction from the other side of the room. Neil took a sharp breath and sat up. This was the signal things were about to begin. ‘I’m going to get Mike.’ Neil rose and trotted down the stairs.

Still sleeping, John and Trevor did not blink an eyelid as Neil shook Mike into life. Neil recalled John telling him earlier in the day how exhausted he had been from little sleep the night before. Groggy and yawning, Mike followed Neil upstairs to the bedroom. Mike clicked the light switch off in the hope of a reaction.

The streetlight outside cast an eerie orange glow in the room as it filtered through the window blinds. Joe’s bed creaked as Lee sat beside Neil, legs outstretched on the mattress.

Mike and Chris lay on David’s bed, and a hush descended.

Neil was the first to hear dragging noises on the carpeted floor. He raised

his hand in a silent gesture. ‘Did anyone hear that?’ He realised the dragging sounds were slow heavy footsteps. Worse still, they were coming in his direction. Neil’s keenness for paranormal activity drained away. He wished the footsteps would stop. They dragged eerily, one before the other, to the base of the bed in which Neil and Lee lay. Neil froze in fear. He struggled to slow his breathing, not wanting to make the slightest noise for fear of attack. He pointed to the end of the bed and mouthed the words, ‘It’s here,’ to Mike, who was now wide-awake. A malevolent presence surrounded Neil like a dark cloak. He was cast adrift, in the knowledge his attacker could pounce on him at any moment. Unseen hands hit the mattress with three loud thumps where his legs lay. Neil bit his lip hard as the mattress vibrated from the force. He slowly edged away to the other side of the bed. ‘Look!’ he whispered to Mike, pointing to the mattress, still vibrating.

‘Hang on, I’ll take some pictures.’ Mike slowly reached for his camera and set the night vision button. Mike pressed the camera shutter button as he made his way towards Neil.

‘It’s stopped,’ Neil said, as he got up and turned on the light.

‘I felt it too,’ Lee whispered in agreement.

Neil took a few deep breaths as Mike reached to turn off the light.

‘You OK to continue?’ Mike asked.

Neil nodded, returning to the bed. The night fell silent. After a while Mike spoke. ‘Maybe if I leave the room it will start up again. I’ll sit on the landing. Call me if anything happens.’ Neil took a few deep breaths as Mike reached to turn off the light.

Mike made his way to the landing and sat outside the bedroom door on the soft carpet.

Bang. An upstairs door slammed with force. Neil, Chris, and Lee jumped in unison. Neil checked on Mike. ‘Did you hear that?’

Mike looked at him with a puzzled expression. ‘Hear what?’

‘I don’t understand. There was this massive banging noise. How could you

not have heard that?' Baffled, they settled back to their former positions.

The heavy footsteps resumed, shuffling, one after the other until they reached the end of the bed where Neil and Lee were lying. Neil held his breath as the footsteps stopped. Rather than feeling a hand thump the mattress, it violently sprang upwards as if punched from underneath. 'Shit,' Neil whispered. 'Do you feel that?'

Lee croaked 'Yes.' He looked ready to alight from the bed at any second.

Chris sat up, staring in their direction. 'I saw it move.' The mattress abruptly jumped upwards, projecting Neil and Lee forward.

'*Grrrrhhh*,' a hellish growl pierced the air. 'Fucking hell, let me out of here,' Neil shouted, jumping off the bed. The growl set off a chain reaction as the men clambered from the room at speed, narrowly missing Mike, who sat totally unawares on the landing.

'What's going on?' Mike shouted at Chris, the last to leave the room. Neil and Lee had not waited long enough to explain, and made a quick departure out into the landing, almost toppling down the stairs.

'Bloody growling,' Chris said. He clasped a hand to his chest as he fought to catch his breath. 'It was really loud, didn't you hear it?'

Mike had not, but the men's reactions were evidence enough. After a calming cigarette, Neil, Lee, and Chris returned upstairs with Mike in the same room. They sat on the beds and Neil steeled himself as the thumps and movements resumed. Bizarrely, every time Mike put his hand on the bed to feel the vibrations, they stopped. It was as if the entity was playing a game with him. The group noticed a green light glowing in the room. It was not uncommon for lights to glow in the boy's room due to the amount of toys and game consoles. They checked the room thoroughly and could not find the source.

Mike's attention was drawn back to the green light glowing beside Chris's face. Chris looked unwell, as if in a daze. 'Are you OK mate?' Mike asked.

Chris blinked and looked at Mike, his thin face expressionless. 'Huh? I feel

a bit funny,' he said, his voice trailing away.

Neil and Lee both watched as Mike took his camera out and began to photograph Chris.

'I don't mean to scare you Chris, but your face is changing. I need to photograph it.' Normally such a statement would be enough to scare anyone, but Chris was staring into the distance and did not seem to hear.

Neil observed Chris's face as the camera flashed.

Chris slowly turned his head and stared at Neil and Lee. As he did so, his features changed.

The flash lit up the room once again, and Neil drew a sharp intake of breath. The person he was looking at was not Chris at all, but an old man with a craggy face, his features lined in a sinister grimace, staring at them intently. The reality of what was happening sunk in.

Neil and Lee shouted in terror. Both men scrambled towards the front door onto the landing in a state of sheer panic.

Mike quickly turned on the light switch, checking Chris was alright, which he was, if a little confused at what just occurred. Mike spoke in calming tones to Neil and Lee, who were shaking with fright. They were genuinely terrified that the entity tried to possess Chris.

'I know what I saw,' Neil gasped trying to draw breath. 'That wasn't Chris. That was horrible. Evil. And it was staring right at me.'

'That frightened the life out of me, look at my leg, I can't stop it from shaking,' Lee said, struggling to control his jerking limbs.

Mike also appeared shaken by what he had seen. 'It's OK mate, I saw it too. Unbelievable.'

Trevor came upstairs to join them, having been awoken by the commotion. After some time to calm down, they all returned to the room.

Neil sensed a presence at the end of the bed. The mattress depressed as if an invisible presence was sitting down.

'Look… look at that,' Lee stuttered pointing to the end of the bed.

Neil braced himself to stay where he was, however uncomfortable he felt. The entity was trying to frighten him, and he was determined not to give in.

Mike rushed to take a photo. He aimed the camera, and the bed sprang up to normal. Mike reviewed the photos and noticed something strange. ‘Come and look at this.’ Mike signalled to them as he squinted at the camera display.

‘I don’t understand it.’ Neil looked over his shoulder to see a photo of himself on the bed. The odd thing was, the lower half of his body appeared to be covered in a black blanket. ‘It looks like one of those cow hide rugs, except it’s all black,’ Neil observed.

Mike called John upstairs to take a look, and he noticed it too, except for one thing. The ‘rug’ was ebbing away. After a few minutes it disappeared from display completely. Mike shook his head; he had never come across anything like it. What was the black shape that appeared on the camera display? Was it a camera malfunction or could it have been the entity that lay across Neil, in a dark mass. There appeared to be no fault with the camera, and the pictures later uploaded with no problems at all, no dark shadows in sight.

The group gathered downstairs to discuss the night’s events. It was well into the early hours, and Lee and Chris decided to go home. Neil and the others dozed on the sofa downstairs until early morning.

The next night carried on the same as before. Embarrassed, they slept through the previous night’s activity, John and Trevor wanted to experience the phenomena for themselves. Hours passed with no occurrences. Mike and John discussed tactics to try to lure the entity into further activity.

By two o’clock in the morning everyone was growing tired. ‘We’ve decided that everyone should retire for the night,’ John said with a wink.

Neil smiled to himself. He doubted the entity would be so gullible to fall for his tactic, but it was worth a try. Neil, Chris and Lee went upstairs to Joe’s bedroom while the investigators stayed downstairs in the living room. Neil tried to recreate the previous night and switched off the light. He sat

back on the bed, his eyes growing accustomed to the dark shadows. *Ping.* What sounded like a coin rolled across the bedroom floor, followed by a *cluck… cluck… cluck.* 'I'm going to tell the others,' he said. He didn't need to. They had guessed something was up and were making their way upstairs. 'I think it's started,' Neil said as Mike and John opened the bedroom door to join them. *Cluck… cluck… cluck*… the sounds continued.

'Maybe it's a toy,' John said, rummaging through the toy box.

'I doubt it,' Neil replied. They continued to search for the source of the sounds, but it proved fruitless. Five minutes later a loud thudding noise filled the room, followed by a female voice uttering unknown syllables in the darkness. They strained to decipher the words, but it did not make any sense.

'I need a cigarette,' Neil said. Neil, Lee and Chris went downstairs while the investigators returned to the room. Then it happened. '*Grrrrrrrrh,'* a menacing growl belched from thin air. The investigators froze, waiting to see if the noise would repeat itself, but it was not to be.

They joined the others downstairs in the living room. John sniffed the air, 'Do you smell something?' he asked. Mike was talking to Mark, engrossed in the call.

'Smells like burning,' Neil said, rushing into the kitchen. They opened the kitchen door and were met with thick smoke coming from the oven grill, which had erupted into flames.

John coughed as he opened the back door.

Neil grappled to extinguish the flames, all the while hearing the taunting noises, *cluck… cluck… cluck.*

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Later that night Neil and Lee stood outside, spirals of smoke rose up between them as they smoked another cigarette. Lee shook his head, 'It's crazy isn't it. Chris's face… it shit the life out of me.'

Neil nodded. ‘Yeah, I know. I didn’t like that either. Still, at least Mike witnessed some action.’

Lee looked up at the sky thoughtfully and returned his gaze to Neil. ‘Have they said how they’re going to get rid of it yet?’

Neil shrugged as he stubbed out his cigarette. ‘No, I think they’re trying to figure out what it is first.’

A small blue object landed at Lee’s feet from above. He bent down to pick it up. ‘It’s a lighter. Where’s that come from?’ he said, putting it on the window ledge. ‘That reminds me, I’d better give Mike back the one I borrowed from him before I forget.’ Lee took Mike’s lighter from his pocket. Right on cue, Mike and John walked over to join them. ‘Thanks mate, here’s your lighter back.’

Mike looked at him with a puzzled expression. ‘That’s not mine. You never borrowed that from me.’

‘Yes he did,’ Neil said. ‘I was with Lee when he asked you for it.’

Mike replied, ‘No he didn’t.’ He pulled the red lighter out of his shirt pocket that he’d been given by Neil earlier. ‘There’s this one, which Neil gave me before…’ Mike then fished another out of his trouser pocket, and said, ‘… and here’s my other lighter, it’s blue’.

Neil pointed at the object, ‘That’s not blue, Mike, its green.’

Mike checked, and, sure enough, the lighter in his hand was pale green in colour. It was also different in design to his own, which had a chrome top. Mike scratched his head in bewilderment.

Neil looked at Mike, ‘Well if that’s not yours, who does it belong to?’

‘Err… It’s mine,’ said a voice to the left. It was John. ‘But I've actually got someone else’s…’

The evening took a surreal turn as members of the group announced the colour lighter in their pocket and swapped back with their rightful owners.

The night moved on, and the group sat downstairs chatting. Given the location of the lighters there was no way a light fingered trickster in the

group would have known which pocket they were located in. From shirt pockets, jean pockets, to combat trouser side pockets, even Fagan would have found it impossible to locate, take, and then plant the roving lighters.

Mike suggested the group go back to bed. Ignoring the entity seemed like the best way of getting a reaction.

‘Sure, I’ll just bring out these plates to the kitchen first,’ Neil said, cleaning up after their night-time snack of hot buttered toast. He walked into the kitchen with Lee and noticed something on the kitchen counter. ‘I’m sure that wasn’t there a minute ago,’ Neil stared at the blue lighter standing upright.

Chris and the investigators followed through. Just as they were about to speak, a loud thumping noise came from upstairs. Mike conducted a head count and confirmed everybody was downstairs. The group climbed the stairs to investigate and split up. Mike and Trevor looked on the landing while the others looked in Neil’s bedroom.

Chris switched the light on and noticed it straight away. There on the bed was a blue cigarette lighter. ‘Will you look at that,’ he said to Neil, ‘it made the noise so we would come upstairs and see it.’

‘Do you think that’s the same one that was in the kitchen?’ Neil examined the lighter. ‘There’s only one way to find out,’ Chris replied, making his way back downstairs. Sure enough, when they returned to the kitchen, the blue lighter was gone.

The rest of the group busied themselves searching the other rooms. A few minutes later they found another lighter on David’s bed, and another one under the pillow. It felt like a very strange game of treasure hunt, and Neil wondered what they would uncover next. He waited with Lee on the landing as the group continued their search, chatting about what occurred.

Lee stopped mid sentence and strained for breath, his eyes wide.

‘What is it?’ Neil asked as Lee looked down at his hand. Lee uncurled his fingers to reveal a lighter and colour drained from his face.

‘What’s wrong mate?’ Neil asked again.

‘That… that wasn’t there a minute ago… it just appeared in my hand.’

Open-mouthed, Neil was lost for words as his gaze met Lee’s.

A while later the group made their way downstairs. Entering the room, Neil asked Mike, ‘Have you got your blue lighter on you, Mike?’

‘Sure,’ Mike replied, ‘it’s in my pocket.’ Mike inserted his right hand into his trouser pocket – but it wasn’t there.

‘I think this is it,’ Neil said handing it to Mike.

John patted his pockets. ‘Mine is gone again!’ he chuckled.

Mike put his hand back in his pocket and felt not one lighter, but two. He pulled them out to see a green lighter had accompanied his own.

‘How on earth did you get that?’ John asked. There could be no rational explanation. ‘Search me,’ Mike shrugged, patting his shirt pocket where he had placed his blue lighter. ‘But it won’t take it out of *this* pocket without me knowing about it.’

As Mike turned to leave the room, Neil and John looked at each other and grinned. They both noticed it at the same time. A blue lighter sat neatly on the white tablecloth of the dining room table. ‘Err… Mike…’ John said, ‘have you got your blue lighter on you?’

Mike stopped halfway through the door. ‘You know I have, you’ve just seen me put it in my shirt pocket.’

Neil sniggered as John said, ‘Can you check it again please?’

Mike sighed, putting his hand in his shirt pocket to pacify them. Nothing. He opened the pocket with his fingers and gaped into the empty space.

John pointed to his lighter on the table. John and Neil couldn’t help but laugh at the expression on his face. For the first time since they’d met him, Mike was speechless.

The lighter incidents continued until the early hours. The entity played with money too, throwing coins. At differing times, Neil and Lee picked up a thrown two pence coin, and upon opening their hand to show it to others,

discovered four pence in the palm of their hands. Neil noticed his coin jar in the kitchen appeared to be diminishing.

He was pleased with how the night had progressed, and the fact the investigators witnessed so much activity. He was also grateful the entity was in a playful mood that night, and nothing more sinister had occurred. His fingers crept to the memory of the scratches at the back of his neck where he was attacked weeks before. He was very grateful indeed.

Everyone settled down by dawn. John, Mike, and Trevor snoozed downstairs in the living room while Chris, Lee, and Neil lay on the beds upstairs. Downstairs, John was disturbed by a faint scratching noise emanating from the sofa.

Mike heard it too. The room eventually fell silent. Weary, John and Mike fell back asleep as Trevor snored. A sharp poke in the back woke Mike with a start. Confused, he tried to figure out what disturbed him. Mike rubbed his back as he stared at the seat. There was nothing there. The red cushioned chair was backed against the wall.

John rubbed his eyes. ‘You alright there?’

‘Dunno, something just poked me in the back.’

Just then, a male voice whispered something barely intelligible. ‘Did you hear that?’ John whispered.

‘Yes.’ Gibberish echoed through the room in a raspy whisper.

‘Shit!’ John exclaimed as loud banging noises thudded from upstairs. *Bang.* The house felt like it was being brought down by a demolition ball. *Bang.* It was terrifying.

Neil, Lee, and Chris galloped downstairs. Neil burst into the lounge, ‘Did you hear those bangs?’

‘We could have heard those back in Tyneside Neil!’ John replied.

‘You won’t believe what else happened,’ Chris said. ‘We were upstairs in Sarah’s bedroom when a loud screeching noise came from the bathroom wall. It sounded like someone was tearing into the tiles with a chisel from one side

of the wall to the other.'

'Or claws,' Neil shuddered. He imagined what sort of entity would be capable of such an action. 'We went to check but the tiles were untouched. That's when the banging started.' The investigators ventured upstairs but found nothing. Everything was as they left it. The bangs stopped, and eventually, everybody settled back down to sleep.

The next morning the investigators returned home, still on a high from their experiences. Neil and Lee stood in the kitchen recounting events. As expected, there was a backlash from their visit. Thumps emanated from upstairs and Neil did his best to ignore them. 'It can thump all it wants,' Neil said, 'that doesn't worry me anymore.' But it appeared the entity did not like being ignored. 'Ow!' Neil yelped as a sharp finger poked into his shoulder. 'Something's just poked me, that really hurt.' Another hard poke followed. Neil winced at the contact, rubbing his shoulder. He hated the physical contact but tried to stay strong.

Lee jumped as he received a sharp prod. 'Ah, get off!'

'Not you as well,' Neil said, standing against the wall in an attempt to avoid further prodding. It was fruitless. For the next forty minutes, both Neil and Lee were prodded intermittently. The physical contact was felt, but not seen. There was no one to call, and nowhere to hide.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Darkest Day

A week after the investigators' visit, I sat at my work desk, trying to drum up the energy to write up a crime report. Instead I found myself staring out the window at the darkening clouds. My fingers rested on the computer keyboard, awaiting instruction. My mobile phone rang out with Neil's name on the display. He had agreed only to call me at work if there was an emergency. My stomach twisted into a knot as I accepted the call. 'Hello?'

Neil's voice trembled on the line. 'Something's happened. I need you to come home.'

'What is it?' I asked, clutching the gold cross around my neck so tightly its edges bit into my fingers.

'Things are getting out of hand. Please, just come home.'

'Okay, okay, I'm leaving now.' I could only imagine the horrors that awaited me. I glanced at my watch. My shift was almost over. I logged off my computer and gripped the table as I stood up, trying to control the anxiety that overwhelmed me. I walked outside to the car park just as my colleague Ian drove in.

'Are you OK?' he asked, a frown crossing his face.

My breath hitched as I stuttered an explanation. 'Neil's called. I need to get home, it's an emergency.'

'God, Caroline you're in no fit state to drive, I'll take you home,' he said, running around to the other side of the car to open the passenger door.

'Thanks,' I whispered. I tried to pull myself together during the car journey as we sped towards home. Normally I would have been embarrassed to have

fallen apart like that. I was not one for bursting into tears, but the tone of Neil's voice frightened me. The minutes passed in a blur as I fought to control the shaking inside my body. Ian tried to reassure me that it would be all right, but I was not so sure. Whatever happened, it must have been bad for Neil to beg me to go home. He had not been himself, and I knew the stress was piling up on him. After what seemed like an eternity, the car pulled up on the drive and we both rushed into the house.

Neil and Lee stood in the hall next to a big puddle of straw-coloured liquid. Neil hunched over, trying to mop it up. Lee stared at the puddle in a trance. Neil raised his head and stared at me with dark circled eyes as he slowly pointed to the stairs.

I looked at the steps and exclaimed, 'Oh,' as I gazed at the large wet claw prints going up each one in turn, in front of the other. 'Where is David?' I whispered in a whimper.

'He's OK now. Mum and Dad are with him in the living room. He was upstairs…' Neil said, unable to finish the sentence. I crumbled. The vision of the ugly footprints going up the stairs towards where my son was playing… My beautiful boy… a wave of nausea overcame me as I put my hands to my mouth. I swallowed back the bile that threatened to spill over. Taking a deep breath I searched the faces around me for explanations. 'This is my home… what's happening to it?' I cried, unable to contain the anguish any longer. I looked to Neil for support but he had also fallen apart.

'I… I just can't take it anymore,' Neil whimpered. He covered his face with his hands and broke down. I stepped forward and reached for him, holding out my arms, and he leaned heavily into my embrace. All the tension from the previous nine months came pouring out as we both stood in the hall and sobbed. I became aware of our silent audience as Lee and Ian shifted uncomfortably.

Taking Neil by the hand, I led him into the downstairs bathroom, grabbing some tissue to dry our tears. We took some deep breaths to recover ourselves.

I shoved the balled up tissue into my pocket, and we joined the others in the hall.

I walked upstairs and looked into David's empty room. His toys lay scattered on the floor. The reality of what happened hit me again when I imagined him innocently playing as the horrors unfolded. A wave of nausea washed over me, stronger this time. Clasping a hand over my mouth, I ran to the bathroom as my stomach lurched. Gagging, I kneeled in front of the toilet and gripped the sides as vomit spewed out. Involuntary tears ran down my cheeks, and I hung over the toilet bowl sniffling until the retching subsided. I stood up, flushed the toilet, and drew a handful of water to my mouth from the bathroom sink. My job had been grim at times, and I had seen some horrific things, but nothing had affected me in this way before. Still feeling sick, I returned to Neil to see if he was OK.

Lee handed me the phone, telling me Mike wanted to speak to me.

'Hello Mike,' I said flatly.

'Are you alright, Caroline love?'

I could barely hold a conversation. 'Why is this happening Mike?' I knew I was asking an impossible question.

'I wish I could give you a proper answer to that.'

'But why us? Why is it doing this to us?'

'I honestly don't know,' Mike said. 'But it's obvious that it is targeting your home, your family.'

'This isn't my home anymore. It isn't like a home. This isn't my home anymore,' I kept repeating. My voice felt distant. Mike tried to reassure me that he would always be there to help. I thanked him and handed the phone back to Lee, who looked as if he had been on a day trip to hell.

Neil's parents walked out from the living room, having cared for David who was temporarily placated watching television.

Standing in the hallway, Neil explained, 'It's been a very active day. Things got bad and we were planning to leave with David.' Neil twitched

involuntarily as he spoke, his body reacting to the prolonged trauma. ‘We were walking from the living room to the hall when we both heard a dripping noise. We saw this puddle of yellow liquid on the wooden floor, dripping from above. At first, it looked as if it was coming from the ceiling, but when we looked closer, it was coming from an inch below, from thin air. That’s when we saw the footprints. I was scared at what might happen next, so I called for help.’

It was difficult to comprehend. Neil put his head down as he continued trying to clean up the puddle, which was as big as a bucket of water. It did not look like water. It had a straw yellow colour and smelt of urine. The puddle had a dry patch in the middle and splayed outwards. I did not know what it was and did not *want* to know. I wanted it gone. Minutes later it was barely visible. I inspected the step marks on the stairs. The round sodden prints had edges on top, like claw marks. They were not the way you would expect steps to be. There was one directly in front of the other, not side to side as with normal footprints. They also stopped three quarter ways up. I could not take it in. Neil took pictures of the mess before it dried. He knew it was the only way to explain to people what was happening. Mike advised us to document everything, although sometimes we were too upset to do so.

A colleague named Paul arrived to check if we were OK. Still in uniform, he removed his hat and rubbed his forehead with a tissue to blot the light sweat breaking out. ‘Everything OK?’ he asked.

‘Shh!’ Neil said, ‘Listen.’ Drip… Drip… Drip. It started again. But where was it coming from?

Neil’s father Ben pointed overhead. ‘Look up, there it is!’ The pitter-patter of drops was coming from the direction of the ceiling, about a foot away. We stood rooted to the spot, staring at the activity.

‘Will you look at that,’ Paul said, staring at the ceiling. ‘They’re coming from thin air.’ I looked at the splattered drops hitting the floorboards, then returned my gaze to the ceiling. There was no source. The drops started

falling a couple of inches down from the ceiling, one drop at a time. They made a trail towards us, then into the downstairs bathroom.

‘It needs the toilet!’ Ben said with a nervous laugh. Not great timing for a joke, but people reacted in different ways. Ben had been spared the horrors of our experiences. Today his curiosity overcame him. We took turns looking into the downstairs bathroom. Ten drops fell before the drips returned to the hall, just above our heads.

‘I can’t believe this,’ Ian said. A seasoned Police Officer, he shook his head incredulously. Minutes later the dripping ceased.

‘That was amazing,’ Paul said. ‘I’ve never seen anything like it.’ Muffled banging noises thumped from the empty rooms upstairs. The floorboards creaked as footsteps could be heard walking around. Paul decided to take the lead. ‘Want to check it out?’ he said, his eyes alight with curiosity.

Neil wearily followed him up the stairs. They looked around, but nothing could be found. All they heard was a *cluck… cluck… cluck* noise. Then silence. It was the entity’s party piece. Create utter chaos then when the Calvary came, disappear like a sniggering coward.

Ian took me to one side as a concerned look crossed his face. ‘You need to get some help. I’m really shocked to see how bad Neil looks. Mentally, what has been done to him is the equivalent of a GBH. He looks a wreck.’

I knew the phrase well; grievous bodily harm was a serious offence, which could be inflicted upon victims mentally as well as physically. I nodded, unable to find the words to reply. I felt drained, and just wanted the whole crazy mess to go away.

‘Caroline,’ he said lowering his voice, ‘to be honest you’re not far behind him. You need to take some time off and sort things out. You can’t go into work like this.’

‘You’re right. I’ll take tomorrow off.’

‘Tomorrow?’ Ian said, raising his eyebrows. ‘You need a couple of weeks at least. Just go to see your doctor, both of you.’

I looked to Neil as everybody returned to the hall. ‘I’ll go back to the nick now to book off duty, and I’ll see the doctor tomorrow.’

Somebody knocked on the door. It was Chris. Neil called him earlier in the day, and Chris explained he just picked up the message.

I told Neil I was going back to the station to clear up my things and would return home to pack up and leave for Clacton. I felt happier knowing Chris was there, he was very sensible and would not hesitate in getting Neil to leave if things became dangerous.

Paul said his goodbyes and I returned to the police station with Ian. I clicked my ‘out of office’ notification on the computer and notified control I was signing off due to sickness.

I was home within the hour. I walked through the open front door and thought I saw the car briefly flicker its hazard lights. ‘Neil I’m back, are you ready?’ I said, looking around. The house had a peculiar energy. The air seemed thicker, almost palpable.

Chris, Lee and Neil came from the kitchen. Joe had just arrived home and they all seemed to be searching for something. ‘What is it, what have you lost?’ I asked.

‘It’s the car keys. The central locking system keeps going off in the car,’ Neil said.

‘Doesn’t that mean someone’s pressing the button on the key fob?’ I said.

‘Well, yeah, but we’ve all held our hands up, it’s none of us, and it’s still being pressed.’

‘Have you tried your pockets? It’s just that I know… *It*… sometimes puts things there.’

Chris replaced the strewn sofa cushions and checked behind the sofa. ‘We’ve tried that, we’ve looked everywhere.’

‘I walked out to the car to hear the central locking click into place as the hazard lights flashed on and off.’

‘I know,’ Neil said, ‘I’m going to ask where he put the keys.’

‘I don’t think communication is a good idea Neil, it’s not as if he will just tell you, is it?’

Neil signalled to Lee and Chris to get in the car. ‘If we all sit in the car, it might answer our questions. One click for yes, two for no.’

I grabbed the car door before he closed it. ‘This is crazy. At least leave one of the doors open while you do it, I don’t want you getting locked inside.’

Neil asked a series of questions and to his amazement, the activations of the central locking system clicked in response. ‘Are the keys in the living room?’ *Click click* responded no.

‘Are they in the bedrooms?’ *Click click* – no. I watched the men’s hands; they were free, and not responsible for the activation. Joe stood, his fingers on the lip of the car door, holding it open while I waited instruction. I was about to give up, when they got a positive answer. ‘Are they in the kitchen?’ *Click* – yes.

‘Right, Caroline you look in the kitchen while we try to narrow it down here. Joe can shout through the answers,’ Neil said, his brow furrowed.

I walked through to the kitchen, swearing under my breath. Taking part in a game of paranormal ‘hot and cold’ was not on my agenda. Tired and upset, I just wanted to go back to Clacton. I searched through the bags of rubbish with no luck. I stared at the cans of dog meat on the counter, thinking hard. *I hope I won’t have to poke through them. Neil found his mobile phone in all sorts of places in the past, in a tub of ice cream in the freezer, in the dog nuts… wait a minute – the dog nuts.* I shouted through to Joe as I eyed the large wholesale bag of dried dog food. ‘Ask if they’re in the dog nuts.’

I heard voices, and the central locking system click once. ‘Yes mum, it said yes.’

Murmuring to myself, I tipped the nuts slowly into a black bin liner on the floor. ‘Right you bugger, where are you,’ I wrinkled my nose at the beefy smell and grasped something solid. *It’s the keys, thank God.*

‘I got them!’ I shouted through, holding the keys tightly in my hand.

Chris wandered into the hall.

‘Where are the others?’ I asked through the open door, rubbing my hands on the sides of my trousers.

‘They decided to keep asking questions,’ Chris said.

I walked through the hall to tell Neil to get out of the car. ‘Well I’ve got the keys, so I can’t see how…’ An enormous roar, coming from the direction of the car, interrupted my sentence. Chris and I locked eyes, and then he turned and sprinted back out the door. Car doors opened and slammed as Neil and Lee stumbled out of the car. Another roar boomed from the car. It was deep and loud, and I wondered if someone was hurt. I followed Chris outside. ‘What the hell was that?’

Neil and Lee were wild eyed and panting, leaning against the wall of the house. ‘I asked if it needed help,’ Neil said.

‘Are you telling me that noise did not come from either of you?’

Neil put his hands on my arms as if to emphasise his statement. ‘Caroline, I swear on my life, that noise did not come from us.’

I loosened my shirt collar. It was getting hard to breathe. ‘I really don’t like this. We’ve got the keys, let’s just get out of here.’

‘OK, I’ll tell Chris and Lee,’ Neil said. The men had made their way to the back garden to calm down with a cigarette. Joe went to his room to pack some things.

I stood in the living room, my mind in a whirl, recounting the activity. I clenched my hands into fists, allowing the fingernails to bite into my palms. It served as a reminder this was not a nightmare from which I could awake. *We need to leave, what’s taking them so long?*

A thunderous roar filled the room, sending me into a spin. Screaming, I ran to Neil and the others, who came running in from the kitchen.

‘Did you hear that?’ Neil gasped.

‘Hear it? I was in the room with it,’ I shouted, frantically grabbing my belongings and locking the doors.

‘It came from the garden,’ Chris said, his face pale. The noise seemed to have reverberated throughout the house. The roar was unlike any of the other noises previously. Unlike the old, gravelly voice, or animalistic snarls I had heard before, this was younger, manly and very angry. Joe clambered down the stairs, his bag in hand.

‘Are you alright?’ I asked.

‘Yeah, was someone shouting? It was really loud.’

‘Don’t worry about it Joe, get in the car, we’re leaving.’

Chris and Lee followed Joe out to the car.

I turned to Neil as he locked the front door. ‘Fucking hell Neil, that was really loud… how did it do that?’

‘I don’t know, it was the same in the car. Let’s go before anything else happens.’ Neil took the car keys from me and giving one last glance behind him, got in the car.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Desperate Measures

I was used to finding pictures of ghosts on my work tray and mock bottles of holy water lying around. In the early days, it was a relief to have a laugh and a joke about it. Police work was tough and the banter with my colleagues kept me going when I became worn down by it all. But I could no longer joke about it, and did not have the strength to go to work. I called into the station to drop in the medical note I was given by the doctors that morning, recommending at least two weeks off due to stress. It felt strange to me. I had never suffered with stress in my life, and was rarely off work with sickness. The Sergeant's office was empty, but the boiling kettle in the kitchen suggested I was not alone.

I poked my head around the corner in the parade room to see Brian, a police community support officer, tapping the keyboard of his computer with his index fingers. He never was very good at typing. He turned his head to greet me, and did a double take, his smile dropping on the second glance. 'Bloody hell girl, are you OK? You look terrible,' he said, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

I shook my head, trying to keep it together. 'It's been awful Brian. We've been forced out of our own home by this *thing* and I didn't know what to do.' Tears sprang in my eyes and I wiped them away with my fingers.

Brian was a staunch atheist and had been very vocal in the past with regards to his lack of belief. He handed me a tissue and gently said, 'You know I don't normally believe in these things, but if you're saying this is happening then I believe you.' Brian ran a hand over his thinning hair. 'Now

sit down girl, and I'll make you a cuppa.'

I sat as instructed, twisting the tissue in my hands. I hated the fact I had become a victim. I was normally the one who held everything together, and felt shamefully weak.

###

A few days later, Alice was performing in the Royal Albert Hall in London with a theatre group. She had worked hard all year practicing her performance, and it was a welcome distraction from what was going on at home. Neil's parents arranged to drive.

Valerie looked me over as she said, 'Are you ready?'

I nodded my head, and we made our way there. It was not until I went to the toilets halfway through the performance that I noticed just how bad I looked. I glanced in the mirror at my unmade face, shocked at the gaunt reflection staring back at me. 'Oh, Caroline look at the state of you,' I spoke to my reflection. My hair was scraped back into an unkempt ponytail, and my face had aged considerably. I was wearing the same scruffy jeans and trainers I had worn all week. 'This is not me at all.'

Normally I would have jumped at the chance to dress up for the occasion, and would rarely be seen without my makeup and jewellery. Embarrassment and shame washed over me. How could I go to see Alice perform in such a state? 'No wonder Valerie asked me if I was ready,' I muttered to myself. While making my way back to my seat I searched my bag, desperate to find some make up, but there was none. I looked around at the other women all suitably preened for the occasion. I was grateful for the dimming lights as the performance resumed and momentarily forgot my worries as Alice began to sing.

I felt relieved to have some time off work, and committed myself to taking positive action. We stayed in Clacton and tried to decide what to do with our

house. Financially we were not in a position to sell as the drop in house prices would have left us in negative equity. My mother tried to persuade us to move to Ireland. It was tempting and we considered it. We desperately wanted to be free of the entity that was making our lives a misery, but at what cost? It would mean giving up my job for one thing. I enquired about transferring to the Gardaí in Ireland but it was impossible. They did not take transferees and the cut off age was thirty five, which ruled me out anyway. Moving would also mean disrupting the children's lives even more. I told my mother we would stay and face up to our problems.

I considered renting, and surfed the Internet to see what was available. Short-term house lets were too expensive with large deposits up front. Neil said it was wasting money, and our problems would still be here when we got back. I rang the Council for help and asked to speak to the emergency housing department. It was an embarrassing phone call. They were unsympathetic and would not help as I owned my own property and was fully employed. Neil suggested renting the house out. I knew it would not be fair on the family moving in. What if anything happened to them? What if the house went on fire? I could not take that chance. I thought about renting a caravan in a nearby caravan park. They were a lot cheaper than houses, but it was winter and freezing outside.

Neil looked over my shoulder as I clicked on pictures of a caravan park online. 'C'mon, there must be another way. This thing can't last forever, maybe we should try moving back home again.'

My eyes widened at the suggestion, and I spoke my words with steely determination. 'Neil. I am never moving into that house again.' Neil opened his mouth to persuade me otherwise, and I silenced him with a filthy look. 'I said never. I don't even know how you can suggest it.'

Neil shrugged. 'Well in that case, we need to see the priest again.'

I was fed up chasing the Catholic Church. Months passed since our last visit and we heard nothing back. Neil still held out hope, and persuaded me to

visit Father Luke.

It was a bitter cold windswept day when Father Luke welcomed us into his chambers. He spoke in a calm reassuring voice, giving us communion and anointing us with holy oils. He disclosed the ritual was reserved for special cases. Neil asked about the exorcism, and Father Luke replied it would take time, but did not go into any details. He also recommended getting in touch with our local parish priest, as he did not want to step on anyone's toes.

We walked out of the church, and Neil linked his arm through mine. 'Do you think he is taking us seriously?' he said.

I was not feeling reassured by our visit. 'He's just not listening. Why is it so hard to get them to come to our house? Why won't they help us?' I swallowed back my frustration as the wind whipped my face.

Another week passed, and we still had not heard anything from the church. I tried telephoning Father Luke, but there was no answer. I did not want to wait any longer and considered his suggestion of contacting our local priest. Walking into the spare bedroom, I dialled the number, closing the door behind me for privacy. I hated making these calls, and hoped the priest would be sympathetic. The phone answered on the third ring and a man's voice introduced himself as the local parish priest.

I gave my name and told him I had been in touch with the priest from another town. I explained we had been having some problems in our house.

'What sort of problems?' His voice was flat and lacking in interest.

'Well, we seem to be haunted. We've had things move in the house and crockery smashed. I was wondering if you could come down and help?' I gave him a watered down version in case he did not believe me.

'What do you want me to do about it?' he said gruffly.

I was starting to feel uncomfortable and stuttered my way through the rest of the explanation. 'We need help, our family are terrified… we've had to move out of our home.'

I paused. No response. 'Have you ever heard of anything like this in the

area?'

'Well, you hear of these things. Do you attend this church?'

I bit my lip as my grip on the phone handset tightened. *I'm looking for help, what does it matter what church I go to?* 'No… I've been attending the Clacton church, but I've been told to come to you as you are in my parish.'

The priest answered in a short clipped tone. 'Well in that case I cannot help you. You will have to go back to where you attend church and ask them.'

I could not believe my ears. *He's saying that he cannot help because I don't attend his sermons.* My heart sank as I pleaded. 'But I've tried, he told me to come to *you*. I've already tried ringing him today and he's not there.'

The priest was impatient and uncaring. 'Don't you know the Pope is in town? Of course he is not there. You'll have to try when he comes back. I can't help you.'

Can't or won't. There was no point in continuing the conversation. 'OK' I answered in a curt tone, 'if you cannot help us then that is fine. Goodbye.'

He seemed to realise just how unsympathetic he had sounded as he replied, 'OK then, goodbye, and… Err… God bless.'

The priest's hypocrisy stung like a slap in the face as I hung up the phone. I was sickened by his response. *God bless? What's the point of saying God bless when he's basically given me the two fingers?* I walked out to the living room and explained to Neil.

'Bloody hypocrite.' Neil paced the room, his face flushed red. 'Call himself a man of God? I should give him a piece of my mind!' Neil threw up his hands in disgust and looked for the phone.

'No Neil, leave it,' I said. 'He's probably just scared.'

'Scared? Caroline it's his *job* to help us.'

'Not if we don't attend his sermons,' I said signalling for Neil to sit down. The last thing I needed was a showdown between Neil and the unwilling priest.

We returned to the Free Church the next day. They were shocked to hear

how things had escalated, and arranged for someone to call to see us the following week. I was impressed by the speed of their assistance. Their second visit consisted of the older minister, Peter, accompanied by a man who they described as a healer with experience in the supernatural. He spent an hour with us, praying in each room and revoking any permission for the entity to be there.

Prior to leaving, the priest spotted my book collection. He fingered his way through the titles, frowning. ‘This is not good, you really shouldn’t have these in the house.’

I picked up the book he was looking at. They were not books on witchcrafts or demons, but rather yoga and meditation. ‘Sorry, I don’t understand. These are books on health and well-being.’

‘Yes, but yoga is a form of meditation and we do not recommend this at all.’ His frown deepened even further when he came across the biographies, some of them penned by spiritualists and mediums.

‘Oh. I take it these are bad too?’

‘Oh most definitely. In fact, if you give me a bin bag I can rid you of these right now.’ I went downstairs and took a black bin bag from the kitchen, ripping it off the roll. It did not make sense. *Surely prayer is a form of meditation?*

I brought the bag upstairs, and the priest piled fifteen of my books inside for destruction. It seemed a bit extreme, but I was happy to go along with it, if it would help.

Before he left, he imparted some advice.

‘Pray regularly, focus on a positive life, and if certain conditions make it worse, avoid them at all cost.’

‘What did you make of that?’ Neil asked.

‘I’m a bit sorry my books are gone, but I guess it can’t do any harm. One thing made sense though, when he talked about avoiding certain conditions that make it worse,’ I said. I took a deep breath, thinking the best solutions

are the most obvious ones. ‘I think you need to stop seeing Lee.’

Neil did not seem surprised by my suggestion. ‘It doesn’t seem fair. It’s not *his* fault after all.’

‘Why don’t you meet him around his place instead?’

‘Lee doesn’t want me around there in case things start up.’

‘Well there you go then,’ I said. ‘Lee will understand why he can’t come to ours. Is there anywhere else you can catch up?’

‘I suppose we could meet up in the pub,’ Neil said, brightening. He telephoned Lee to explain. He made it clear that we did not blame him, but somehow the entity was more powerful when he was around. I wondered if Lee was a host, or if their combined energy gave it more life. We just did not know. Meeting in the pub seemed like a fair compromise and we hoped the last paranormal event was a dying swan song.

Things improved immeasurably after the priest’s attendance. It was a tough decision asking them to visit again, given the reaction of the entity the first time around. Apart from some minor events, the activity had all but stopped.

###

The time of year I was dreading the most came around – Halloween. If there was one holiday that I wished would disappear, this was it. But there was no getting away from it. Cardboard ghouls hung from the ceiling of my local supermarket while chocolate eyeballs stared at me as I queued to pay for my food. Despite everything, the children wanted to participate. David was amazed by it all. Knocking on doors and being given sweets was his idea of heaven. I smiled at the irony of it as I shadowed my two little ghouls singing ‘trick or treat’ at each door.

Neil was feeling a lot stronger, even managing to joke about it, ‘Can you imagine if the trick or treaters came in and it all started up here? They would be thinking… Wow, amazing effects!’

‘No, more like what a bunch of weirdoes, get me out of here!’ I mused, happy to see Neil with a twinkle in his eye.

I did what I vowed never to do and moved back home. The children missed their rooms and were very restricted in the flat in Clacton. I felt like a coward. Everybody else seemed happy to move back except me. Neil was adamant it was the right thing to do. He had been through the worst of the attacks and reasoned that if he felt it was right then I should support him. A few heated discussions later, I agreed to give it a trial run.

The sun was shining the day we crept back into our house, belongings in hand. *It seems empty without the dogs,* I reflected with a sense of loss. Empty and hollow. I rubbed my arms. The house was warm, but I felt chilled to my bones. The children raced upstairs, arguing who was going to use the computer first. I busied myself dragging out their mattresses into my room, my thoughts racing forward to the dreaded night ahead. The day passed without event, and that night the children climbed between the freshly washed sheets, happy to be home.

Neil turned to face me, and his yawn broke into a gentle smile. ‘Try not to worry love, get some sleep.’

‘I’ll try. Goodnight,’ I said, throwing one last glance over the children. I closed my eyes and tried to rest. Bad memories crept into my thoughts like an arm of ants, digging and tunnelling new nightmares. I fell into a restless sleep, waking every hour as my mind took on sentry duty.

Two weeks passed, and we began to relax. The house began to feel like home again, and the atmosphere lightened. Our children moved back into their own rooms. David was the exception; he had become used to sleeping in our bed and he liked it. Moving him back to his own room was a bit trickier. That night carrying my slumbering son into his own bed, I reflected how grateful I was that they got through the experience unharmed. I did not like to question *why* the children were never directly involved as it felt like tempting fate.

Life carried on without disruption, and we did not discuss past events. I made a conscious effort to pack away the bad memories into a little box in my head marked ‘Do Not Open.’ By the end of September the activity completely stopped. I missed my dogs and regretted parting with them. I spoke to the new owners and managed to get Lara back. She had not settled in at all and was still pining for us.

The day we brought her home was a happy one. As I walked into the house with Lara, her tail wagging furiously, it felt we were turning a new page. In retrospect I was more than correct. Things were to take an amazing twist.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Stranger & Stranger

Neil developed a new understanding of the Paranormal. Rather than shying away from what happened, he devoted his time studying theories for explanations. A creeping sensation at the back of his mind told him it was not over. It lessened the shock when he received a call from his brother Mark one afternoon. ‘Everything alright?’ Neil asked.

‘I don’t know if I should tell you or not,’ Mark replied.

‘What is it?’

‘It’s just that I got a weird message on my mobile phone from an unknown caller.’

‘What did it say?’

‘It was hard to tell at first, the background noises were very strange. Then halfway through the message I heard a voice. It said, “I’m coming back – I’m fucking coming back.” Then it hung up.’

‘If he comes back I’m ready. He’s not going to scare me this time.’ Neil ended the conversation, warning Mark to keep the details of the call to himself. He did not want to worry anyone unnecessarily. The priests withdrew any consent for the entity to make itself known in the house. Time would tell if it worked.

###

Neil often met Chris and Lee in a local pub, ‘The Ship’. He enjoyed the quietness; the cosy pub was steeped in history, and had low-beamed ceilings

and open fire. Fed up calling the entity ‘it,’ Neil and his friends jokingly came up with the name ‘Phil’ after a popular soap character on television known for making loud exhaling noises. Neil felt a sense of empowerment by giving the entity a harmless sounding name, and that night ‘Phil’ was the topic of conversation. Neil leaned against the bar sipping his diet coke while reflecting back to the days before everything occurred.

The men were in deep conversation when they heard a *ping* as something small hit the thinly carpeted floor and rested at their feet.

‘What was that?’ Lee said, uncurling his legs from the bar stool and looking around.

Neil bent down, picked up a five pence piece, and laid it flat on the bar. ‘Must be this, it wasn’t there before.’ He tried not to jump to conclusions. The thought of the entity being in the pub seemed a bit silly. ‘Anyone coming outside for a cigarette?’ he said.

Chris and Lee followed Neil to the outside smoking area. Neil rummaged for the lighter in his pocket, and something small fell from the sky at their feet. ‘It’s over there,’ Neil pointed to the floor as Lee bent down to look for the source of the noise.

‘It’s a five pence again. I wonder if it’s the same one that dropped inside?’ Lee said as he examined the coin between his fingers.

‘I’d say so. It’s back, isn't it?’ Neil said with a sigh, surrendering to the nervous feeling, which was growing inside him. Mystified, they stubbed the remainders of their cigarettes and returned inside. Poppy day was fast approaching and the bar was adorned with a poppy tray and collection box.

‘Hey, perhaps we’re going to be showered with poppies,’ Lee joked, eyeing up the display of paper poppies as the barmaid served their drinks.

Neil smiled and put his hand in his jeans pocket to pay for their drinks. He felt something odd. The paper he was pulling out was not cash. He held the unknown item up to the light. It was a red paper poppy with a hard plastic stem. Neil nudged Lee as he looked at the red paper flower in amazement.

The barmaid gave them a peculiar look and carried on serving.

Neil, Lee and Chris decided to try and change the subject from the paranormal. As fascinating as it was, Chris recommended they take a step back from discussing it, to avoid any problems. They chatted outside in the smoking area, pulling their jackets tight to keep out the cold. Tendrils of smoke floated up into the clear night air.

Neil stubbed his cigarette in the ashtray on the wooden bench, when a small stone dropped on the wooden decking at his feet. He picked it up and examined it, pressing on the stone between his fingers, as if to ensure it was real. Shaking his head, he threw the pebble on the ground. Neil walked back inside and took his seat.

Chris followed behind and cast his eyes on the wooden bar in front of him. A small grey pebble rested beside his soft drink. Chris looked inquiringly at Neil. ‘Is that the same stone you found outside?’

Neil stared at the stone that was now on the bar. ‘Huh, looks like it, but how did it get there?’ Neil guessed the entity was responsible. A tall figure stood behind Chris, and he presumed it was Lee. Seconds later the figure was gone. Neil asked Chris casually, ‘Where’s Lee gone?’

Chris looked at Neil with a puzzled expression, ‘He’s still outside finishing off his cigarette.’

‘But he was beside you a second ago,’ Neil said, his voice tapering away.

‘No he wasn’t,’ Chris replied. ‘Here he is now.’

‘You alright Neil? You look like you’ve just seen a ghost,’ Lee chuckled as he joined them.

‘You might be right. Were you in here a second ago?’ Neil asked.

‘No, you saw me just come in,’ Lee said.

Neil surveyed the room devoid of customers. He bit his lip, convinced he had just glimpsed his tormentor.

The trio stood at the bar finishing their drinks. Neil swirled the ice cubes in his glass, trying to rationalise what he had seen. All of a sudden, strong

fingers poked him sharply in the hollow of his back. ‘Ow!’ he shouted as he spun around. Apart from Chris and Lee on either side, there was nobody there. Neil knew they could not have been responsible, they were swigging down the dregs of their drinks, and the poke had come from directly behind him. Neil felt his flesh creep. Coin throwing was one thing, but he hated physical contact. He explained what happened to Lee and Chris, determined to stay upbeat.

They walked out to the front of the pub to leave, and a coin fell from the clear night sky. Neil looked up at the twinkling stars overhead, wondering if paranormal events were really occurring outside of his home. He dropped his friends at home and hoped for a peaceful night.

The house felt quiet and welcoming as he walked in the door. Lying in bed, he told himself that at least if things occurred in public they could not get out of hand. Or so he hoped.

The coin throwing carried on in the pub. Neil, Lee, and Chris were still meeting once a week and strangely, there were no occurrences in between.

The weeks rolled forward into December and Neil and Lee stood in the smoking area to the rear of the pub, which was lined with a coating of snow. Neil strained to hear the faintest plopping sound as something hit the snow on the roof of the smoking shelter. The glow of the outside lighting revealed what looked like a coin, which appeared to have come from thin air.

Lee ignored the noise. He was too busy drawing pictures in the fresh snow glistening on a wooden picnic table. Neil walked around the table to view the picture of a cat, which Lee had drawn in the snow using his finger.

‘Proper work of art there, eh Lee?’

Lee laughed in response as they stubbed their cigarettes in the damp ashtray. They turned to walk back inside to the warmth of the pub.

Neil glanced at the picture and did a double take. There was an addition to Lee’s picture. ‘Will you look at that?’ Neil laughed. ‘It’s a fish skeleton, like in the cartoons.’ Neil pointed to the childish picture drawn beside Lee’s.

Lee looked down to the ground. The only footprints in the snow were theirs. ‘What next?’ Lee said, glancing around one more time as he followed Neil inside.

They returned to their drinks and Neil peered into his glass to see something swimming on top. He dipped his fingers in and pulled out broken cigarettes soaked in diet coke. Cigarette butts littered the table. Neil checked the cigarettes in his pocket. He whistled in appreciation when he found they were untouched. They were expensive enough without being drowned in coke.

The variety of events amazed him. He discussed the entity with Lee while standing outside the pub smoking. Their chatting came to an abrupt halt as two small white objects floated down from the sky in front of their eyes in slow motion. This was different from the normal clang of a coin thrown at speed. The objects were floating, like feathers to the ground. Neil bent to pick one up. ‘Where are they coming from? It’s a broken up cigarette.’

Lee picked up the other half of the cigarette. ‘This one too. Did you see how slowly they fell?’

Neil nodded. If he were alone, he may have believed he was losing his mind. Neil and Lee went back inside and began a game of pool. Neil aimed to take his shot, pulling back the cue. He froze as the white ball disappeared in front of his eyes.

‘Where’s the ball gone?’ Lee said, his eyes darting around the table. Neil stared at the table in silence, waiting for the ball to reappear.

‘Aha, there it is,’ Lee said excitedly, pointing to the other end of the table. Unable to concentrate on the game, Neil and Lee sat quietly at a small round wooden table. The ice in their glasses made chinking noises as the table began to vibrate.

‘Is that you? Mind the drinks mate,’ Neil said. He knew Lee had a habit of shaking his leg and presumed it was causing the movements.

‘It’s not me, look,’ Lee replied; they both looked underneath to see Lee’s

legs stretched out, away from the table. The vibrations continued. Not enough to knock the drinks over, but enough to spill the contents if the glasses were full.

Neil bit his nails, unsure of his next move. The small pub became unusually busy, they were bound to attract attention. He got up and stood at the bar with Lee after ordering their drinks, hoping to avoid further activity.

‘I don’t believe this,’ Lee whispered. ‘It’s trying to lift the bar.’ Neil strained to hear the creaking noises coming from the bar top. He placed his hand on the bar to feel the vibrations. ‘We’d better sit down,’ Neil said. Grabbing their drinks, they walked to a vacant table. Neil chose the table farthest away and sat down, grinning nervously. *Bang*. The table jumped upwards and their drinks overturned. It was as if a strong fist hit the table from underneath, causing the table to jolt and tip.

Lee jumped out of the way, the contents of the glasses sloshed in his direction.

‘Sorry,’ Neil said, with embarrassment when the barman came over to clear up the mess. ‘I think it’s time to call it a night,’ Lee said. They rose to leave and a strange ‘*beep*’ sound shrieked in the air, causing the other customers to stop and stare. Neil’s face reddened as he pushed through the front door. Worse still, it appeared to be coming from him. ‘What was that?’ Neil said to Lee, as he walked to his parked car.

‘I don’t know, it was very loud though, wasn’t it?’ Lee said, chuckling. It was as if the entity was having fun with them, like a child playing with a whoopee cushion.

As Neil drove home, his thoughts floated far away in a land fraught with possibilities. Neil began to look forward to the weekend pub meet ups. Anxiety shifted to anticipation as he wondered what would happen next.

The sounds progressed with time. They seemed to appear more when the opportunity arose to embarrass Neil in particular. One night Chris, Neil, and Lee were playing darts. People entered the pub and sat at a nearby table. Just

as Lee went to take his shot there was a loud '*beep*' from his direction.

Lee held in a snigger and took his shot.

Neil rolled his eyes. It was his turn. He raised his hand to throw the dart, and a loud '*mooo,*' bellowed beside him. Neil lowered the dart as Lee spluttered a laugh and tried to pass it off as a cough. 'Cigarette?' Neil said, unable to trust himself to say more without laughing. '*Beep,*' it shrieked, louder.

The three men walked out the door, heads down, stifling their amusement. They returned to their table after regaining their composure and were not surprised to find the other drinkers had moved tables. The noises ceased when the audience departed.

The entity was capable of more unpleasant things. Bad smells emanated from their table, which was very embarrassing when staff came to collect the glasses. Neil felt a light gust of air as a very loud '*burp*' erupted in front of him. He covered his nose with his hand as the foul stench overcame him. It was as if someone with a mouthful of rotten teeth had burped in his face.

Lee and Chris heard the noise and looked at him, laughing. 'It wasn't me,' Neil proclaimed his innocence, much to their amusement.

Table movements became stronger. The heaviest wooden tables lifted several centimetres from the ground in front of them. It became so frequent Neil and his friends played a game, placing their little finger under the lip of the table, and laughed as it lifted in the air. The entity demonstrated he was capable of shoving the table across to the unfortunate person sitting in the corner, trapping them. Efforts to move the table were of no use; it was like shoving a solid wall. After a few seconds, the force lifted, and the table shoved out of the way.

'Why don't you ask someone else in the pub to witness it?' Chris said. 'All this stuff is happening in front of people and they have no idea.'

'I'll give it a try, but they'll think I'm mad,' Neil said. He scanned the room to see a neighbour he vaguely knew, and joined his table for a chat. The

elderly man sipped his pint as he listened intently to Neil’s story. Neil invited him to join their table, but when he did, all activity ceased. The man made his excuses and returned to his table.

Neil learned that new witnesses had to be present for some time before they could experience activity. He also began to communicate with the entity using the ‘tap once for yes, two for no’ rule. He wondered if the movement of the table had been a request to communicate all along.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Tap Once For Yes

Neil walked into our bedroom after returning home from the pub. The jangle of his car keys on the bedside table awoke me from a light sleep. Rubbing my eyes I sat up and turned on the bedside lamp to see an expression of guarded amusement on his face. I yawned. ‘Are you going to tell me then?’

‘Tell you what?’ Neil smiled. He was often amused at my uncanny ability to read his mind.

‘Tell me what’s been going on. Has it started up again?’ The statement did not frighten me. I regained my strength and felt safe in the house. Whatever it was, it could not be that bad if Neil was smiling.

Neil sat on the edge of the bed as he took off his shoes. He explained the occurrences in the pub, reassuring me the activity was harmless.

‘It’s weird, a ghost that goes down the pub with you,’ I said, my voice thick with sleep.

‘Why don’t you come out and see for yourself? I don’t think it wants to do us any harm.’

‘I don’t know if I’m ready for a rematch just yet, I’ll think about it.’ Turning off the light I snuggled back down under the duvet.

###

Eventually, curiosity got the better of me, and I decided to join Neil and Lee in the pub. I shuffled in my seat nervously.

‘What’s wrong with you?’ Neil asked, bemused.

‘I just feel a bit apprehensive, that’s all.’ I glanced around the pub looking for signs that ‘Phil’ was in the room.

I did not have to wait very long. A mere half an hour after arriving, ‘Phil’ made his presence known. The table shuddered each time I stood at the bar, and stopped abruptly as I spun around. This and the following occurrences had a child like quality, and Neil and Lee snickered when I missed yet another happening.

A loud ‘*beep*’ filled the room. ‘What’s that, a smoke alarm?’

Lee chuckled. ‘No, it’s Phil.’ I looked at him open mouthed. It couldn’t be. But it was. The noise came from different parts of the room each time.

I asked if we could go elsewhere to ensure it was not connected to the pub. We finished our drinks and walked down the road to the nearby ‘Red Lion’ pub. Lee ducked his head slightly as he entered the doorway. The Georgian beamed ceilings were very low indeed, suggesting the building had been around for some time. *Perfect for haunting* I thought grimly . Without warning, a birdsong emanated loudly from the centre of the carpeted floor. Looking around, I tried to find the source of the noise. ‘Did you hear a bird singing?’ I asked, wondering if one had flown in through the window. It seemed unlikely, given it was dark outside.

Neil nodded. ‘I heard it. Last week I came in and saw a small blackbird on the floor. It flapped about for a few seconds, like someone was holding it down. Then it disappeared into thin air.’

I imagined the bird, helpless and terrified, pinned on the pub floor, only to disappear seconds later. I shuddered, hoping the entity would not resume his antics at home. *Beep*. The noise filled the air again and appeared to be coming from between Neil and Lee. I clutched my bag in fright. Neil did not flicker. He was used to the noises by now. The night progressed and the table began vibrating and moving by itself. The movements escalated into raps and bangs on the wooden surface. It seemed ‘Phil’ was trying to tip it over. I grasped my drink, unable to believe my eyes as the table juddered into life.

Neil brought us another fresh round of soft drinks. As he placed them on the small round table, it defied its heavy cast iron base and jumped forward tipping over in Lee's direction.

'Shit!' Lee swore, as the sticky orange liquid and freezing ice cubes fell onto his lap. The glasses bounced off the carpet still intact.

I clasped my hand to my mouth to stifle a shriek.

'Oh for God's sake,' Neil said as he jumped up, grabbing the table and setting it upright.

'Look at me, I'm all wet.' Lee stood in disgust, his jeans soaked, with a large damp patch staining his crotch.

I picked up the empty glasses, thankful there were only a couple of other customers in the pub. 'Maybe we should go,' I suggested.

'Too right,' said Lee, 'I need to get home and dry out.'

Intrigued, I agreed to meet up the following week. Neil purchased a voice recorder in the hope of capturing evidence. The recorder was discreet enough to remain hidden, and he placed it on the table each time he went out.

Playback revealed low deep growls and gravelly voices uttering his name. I was unhappy about Neil using the device, and worried the extra focus would be an open invitation for the entity to resume activity in our home. The activity was fascinating, but I was torn. I had not forgotten what we had been through, but found myself being drawn in regardless. Neil wanted answers and tried to reason that the entity was not there to harm us. I couldn't help but wonder – what if it just wanted to communicate with us? What if we had stumbled on something miraculous? After all, mediums speak to spirits for a living and no harm comes to them, I reasoned. I began listening to the communications and saved them on my computer.

The entity responded to his questions. Knocks and bangs on the table seemed to be the preferred method. One for yes, two for no. Quite often the table creaked and groaned as the screws holding it together were forced into movement. But the table was not the only thing it could move.

The area where we lived was soaked in history, and many of the buildings were very old, including the pubs. Neil and Lee brought me to the oldest recorded pub in our area. I looked around, taking in my surroundings. ‘Bit dark in here isn’t it?’

Neil smiled, folding his arms, ‘Quiet and dark, just the way I like it.’ A tall glass cabinet full of metal painted soldiers decorated a dark corner of the pub. The soldiers stood frozen in battle, covered in a thick layer of dust. Spotlights shone down on the figures, amplifying the specks of greyness.

‘Wouldn’t it be funny if the soldiers started moving in the cabinet?’ I said. I joined Neil and Lee as we wandered over to have a look.

‘Yeah, they could all have a little war in there,’ Lee sniggered.

Neil’s eyes lit up, ‘It could be like something out of *Night at the Museum*!’ referring to a movie where tiny soldiers came to life.

I rolled my eyes at Neil. *As if such a thing could happen.*

Neil’s face suggested an idea was mulling over in his mind. ‘Hey Phil, move the soldiers,’ he said, his eyes twinkling, a mischievous grin spreading across his face.

‘That *would* be something wouldn’t it,’ I said, as we returned to our table.

Seconds later, Lee leaned forward and squinted at the cabinet. ‘I’m sure I just saw a soldier move,’ he said.

‘It has! Some of the soldiers have moved from the front of the cabinet too,’ Neil replied.

‘Don’t be silly,’ I laughed. Despite everything I had experienced, the thought of the soldiers moving on their own seemed crazy. But curiosity bit. I cursed my short-sightedness and took a few steps forward for a closer look.

‘Loads of them have moved,’ Lee said, flashing me an excited smile. The dust marks suggested some of the soldiers had been picked up and deposited elsewhere while others had been dragged. Scrawled lines in the dust revealed shaky movements. Others had just fallen over. I cupped my hands over my mouth and laughed. This was something different, and my mind filled with

possibilities. What else could it move? Just what was the extent of its powers?

###

Neil's comments prior to the soldier incident gave me food for thought. I had an idea and wanted to run it by him. The next day the two of us went out for breakfast, and I brought up my theory. 'Neil, remember before the soldiers moved when you asked Phil to do it?'

Neil answered, not raising his eyes from the full English breakfast on his plate, 'Yes, why?'

'Could you have done it with your mind?'

'What, like telepathy?'

'No, that's minding reading. I think it's called telekinesis?'

Neil took a bite into his sausage and chewed it slowly as he gave the idea some thought. 'I see where you're coming from, but it can't be me. We've tested it. If one of us holds our fingers up behind our backs, it taps out the number.' Neil said, waving his fork around. 'Also, if we ask it things, it gets it right, even when I don't know the answer.'

The thoughts of the entity reading my mind made me uneasy. I took a swig of my coffee, feeling silly for mentioning it. 'Okay, sorry, I didn't mean to imply anything, just forget I brought it up.'

The following weekend I attended the pub again, happy there had been no activity in the house, in between. I accepted we were safe in a public place, and felt a tingle of excitement laced with apprehension as we entered a new stage of our paranormal experiences.

I sat with Neil and Lee in 'The Rose & Crown' pub. The small round table soon became active with taps and knocks in answer to our questions.

Neil disclosed 'Phil's' latest trick of grabbing their leg under the table.

I shuddered as he demonstrated the grasp, 'Ugh don't do that, it gives me

the creeps.'

Lee began to chuckle, 'Oh I don't know… if it was a female's ghostly hand perhaps it wouldn't be so bad.'

Neil laughed in response, 'Yeah, with long painted fingernails, can you imagine it?'

'How rude,' I laughed, stopping short as something hit my leg. 'Oh,' I said, 'something just kicked me. That wasn't you, was it?'

Neil laughed, 'No it bloody wasn't.'

I did not think it was. The kick came too high up on the side of my leg for it to be Neil. 'Oh, there it goes again,' I said, in response to another faint kick.

I giggled nervously, crossing my legs under my chair in an attempt to avoid further contact. Neil described how chairs moving by themselves had become commonplace in the pub. I stared at a customer sitting across from me, wishing they could experience the activity too. 'Hey Phil, why don't you move *her* chair, or give *her* a kick.' Leaning back against the wall, I stared at the unsuspecting drinker. 'Oh!' I jumped forward as a pointy finger prodded me in the back. 'He poked me,' I whispered to Neil.

'That's what you get for asking him to kick that woman,' Neil said with a smile.

'Yeah, but it poked me through the wall!' I jabbed my thumb behind me.

The small pub became increasingly busy.

'Will we go to another pub?' Neil said. A loud thump for *yes* hit the table.

We laughed in amazement. 'I wasn't asking you,' Neil said.

'Oh, that means the drinks are on you then?' I said to 'Phil'.

The table tapped twice for no.

'Are you sure? Drinks on you?' Neil said, listening for a response. We were standing up by now, ready to leave. Everybody's hands were in sight and I had no doubt 'Phil' was playing with us.

Again, the table tapped twice for no. It seemed he was happier spilling

drinks than buying them. We tried to contain our laughter as we walked out the pub and jumped in the car to drive the short distance to the pub further down the road.

Neil's tape recorder was at the ready, and we sat in 'The Bell' pub, which was rumoured to have a ghost of its own. The atmosphere in the pub was homely, and with its cream coloured walls and modern bar, it was hard to imagine anything spooky occurring there. As always, Neil took the furthest table away from the other customers. Neil mentioned if things got too heated, we would probably have to leave. It was still early, but the winter night had drawn in fast, and it was completely dark outside.

We joined Lee at a large round wooden table, using three of the six chairs pushed into it. I leaned into the curved back of my chair and took a sip of my drink as Neil talked about Chris, who was unable to attend.

'Remember last week when Chris asked Phil to show itself?' Neil said to Lee.

'You're joking me, why did he say that?' I interrupted.

Neil shrugged, 'Dunno, I guess he wanted to see it. Anyway nothing happened that night.'

'I should hope not, you don't want to be asking that Neil.'

Neil leaned forward so nobody else could hear. 'Yeah, well, he called me to say that he's been having some funny things happen at home. The other night he was in bed when he saw a big black figure standing over him.

'Are you sure he wasn't dreaming?' I asked, digging for a rational explanation.

'No, he hadn't been to sleep. He said he heard a weird noise first, and it looked like a big black jelly baby.'

Lee laughed at the description, but it made me think. Chris was level headed, and would never have confided in his experiences if he had any doubt they were real. A flicker of movement distracted me.

'Did that chair just move?' I said to Neil and Lee, who did not appear to

have noticed. ‘My eyes might have been playing tricks on me.’

‘We get it all the time,’ Neil replied.

‘Whoa! Fucking hell,’ I grasped Neil by the jacket as I realised my eyes were working perfectly well. The chair directly in front of me *was* moving, back from the table as if someone was pulling it out to sit on it.

‘There you go,’ Neil said, watching the chair being pulled back from the table.

I held my hand to my mouth, ‘Fuc-king hell!’

Neil and Lee calmly watched the chairs move. ‘We get this all the time,’ Neil said.

‘Oh my God, I don’t like it, stop it!’ my voice squeaked as I tried to contain myself.

The first chair was still moving as the one beside it also moved back. It appeared we had two invisible guests at our table.

‘Shush, just calm down a bit,’ Neil said, more interested in the strange looks I was getting from other pub dwellers than the moving chair. The trouble is, they weren’t looking at the chairs, they were looking at me, the woman squeaking and grabbing at her husband like she was about to fit.

The chairs came to rest. ‘Oh my God, my poor heart is doing ninety, I can’t believe I’ve just seen that. I wish Tracey was here to see it.’

‘Well you know none of us have done it,’ Neil said, amused by my reaction. ‘If we had legs that long, we would be like Mr Tickle,’ he snickered. The table was round and wide, and the movement of the heavy chairs suggested they had been pulled back from behind.

Lee joined in, waving his arms in a Mr Tickle impression, ‘Yeah, can you imagine him moving around the chairs.’

‘I’m freaked out right now,’ I said, a little embarrassed by my outburst. ‘What are you laughing at?’

‘We’re laughing as it’s the first time you’ve ever seen it,’ Neil said.

‘I nearly sat on your lap there. How did Chris react when he saw it?’

‘Chris never gets fazed by anything.’

‘He didn’t do a Scooby Doo and try to jump into your arms like me.’

Neil shook his head, smiling. The table began to tap and creak.

I ignored it, still reeling at seeing chairs move so far in a public place. ‘I’m not brave with something like that, but as a police officer I’m brave. I can go into a house being burgled, and it doesn’t worry me as I know how to deal with it. But with this, you don’t know how to react as there’s nothing you can do to protect yourself. This isn’t real life,’ I said, trying to justify my reaction.

Neil smiled calmly, ‘I know, we’ve seen it all before.’

I stood up, discreetly took some photos of the chairs and sat back down again.

Neil took out his cigarettes and nodded towards the rear door, which led to the outdoor smoking area. ‘Shall we go for a smoke then? You coming?’ Neil said, emitting another chuckle.

I grabbed my handbag. ‘Yeah.’

Neil explained some of the outside occurrences, in the smoking area. I took one of his cigarettes to help calm my nerves.

‘See that?’ Neil pointed to the cream tarpaulin awning overhead. ‘One night a hand pushed through there, clear as anything.’

‘Yeah,’ Lee said, ‘and when we tried to get back into the pub, we were locked out. We hammered on the door for ages but nobody heard us. Eventually we legged it through the graveyard.’

I peered out into the darkness, and faintly made out the headstones next to the gravel trail, shadowed by the tall trees overhead. The pub was situated near a church, and, unfortunately for Neil, backed out onto a graveyard.

‘Footsteps kept running at us through the gravel, and there were breathing sounds behind me,’ Neil said.

I shivered involuntarily. ‘I don’t want to be making any detours tonight.’

I finished my cigarette, telling myself it would be my last one. Dismay

overcame me as I realised the back door was locked. ‘It’s not opening,’ I said to Neil. The door had been off the latch on the other side, and I was the last one to close it. I looked at Neil and Lee, knowing there was no way I would walk through the shortcut of the graveyard to get back inside. I rattled the door, and my knocks went unanswered. I felt a lump grow in my throat. The silence was broken by someone coming to our aid on the other side.

I exhaled in relief.

‘You’re lucky,’ Neil said, ‘they don’t always answer.’

The door made a noise as someone fiddled with the latch, and was mercifully opened by the landlord. ‘That’s funny,’ he said, scratching his bald head as he looked at Neil, ‘you’re the only ones to be locked out. It’s always left off the latch.’

We pretended to look surprised. He would never believe the truth.

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A few weeks afterwards, Neil and Lee attended ‘The Red Lion’ pub with Paranormal Investigators Mike and John during another visit. Mike struck up a conversation with the Manager at the bar, casually asking him if such an old pub was haunted.

The old landlord nodded his head. ‘Oh yes, we’ve had many strange occurrences. Why only last week all the soldiers in the cabinet moved by themselves. The cabinet’s locked but you could see the movements in the dust.’ Mike gave him a look of mock surprise. The landlord leaned across the old wooden bar, raised his bushy eyebrows and whispered mysteriously. ‘Other things happen too, very strange. One day, a red balloon floated into the pub, and went into every room, even into the kitchen as if someone was holding it. After a while it flew out the window. Ever since then, if we see anything ghostly we blow up a balloon. Maybe it’s a child haunting the place.’

Mike returned to his seat. The night was full of activity as the air was filled with mysterious sounds, and the table creaked and shuddered where they sat. Taps and bangs became louder, and the activity rose to a crescendo with the table bucking from the floor. Neil glanced up at the landlord, his eyes wide, hastily blowing up a red balloon.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Conversations With The Dead

Thoughts of paranormal activity filtered into my work life. I confided in my colleague Tracey, about the activity in the pub.

‘Really? Ohhh I’d love to see it for myself,’ she said, her face lighting up with a grin.

I’d known Tracey for several years. Full figured and shapely, she had a calm and easy-going manner that made her easy to like. ‘You can join us if you like, we’re going out next weekend,’ I offered.

Tracey hesitated only for a second. ‘Yes, I’d love to.’

The week went quickly and we met with Lee and his girlfriend *Josie in our usual pub. I had not met Josie before, but heard from Neil that she was very interested in the paranormal. She had already witnessed several occurrences without batting an eyelid. Her short black spiky hair suited her elfin features perfectly, and I gave her a knowing smile.

Tracey arranged to meet us at seven thirty, and I watched the glare of her car’s headlights shine through the pub windows. I walked out to see her exiting the car with a grin on her face.

‘How’s it going? Anything happen yet?’ she asked, brushing a strand of wavy auburn hair off her face.

‘No,’ I replied. ‘You never know when it’s going to start. Hopefully you’ll see something tonight.’ We walked inside and joined the others, introductions were made, and we settled down for a chat.

Tracey listened, fascinated as Neil and Lee recalled previous events. Hours passed and apart from feeling a chill in the air, nothing eventful occurred.

‘We can try another pub if you like, I’m just going to the toilet first,’ Neil said.

I gave him a cheeky smile. ‘On your own? Are you sure?’

Lee chuckled, ‘Yeah, he’ll come running out of the toilet in a minute with his trousers around his ankles shouting, “It was Phil, it was Phil!” ’

We giggled as Neil rolled his eyes and walked to the toilet alone. We ventured to another pub across the road. I brought some crisps back to the table as Neil switched the recorder on. ‘It’s going to be great fun listening to these sounds with all of us munching crisps in the background!’ I laughed, knowing I would have hours of recordings to check. But Neil was not listening. He was staring blankly into the distance. ‘What’s wrong?’ I asked, touching his arm. The sleeve of his leather jacket felt cold to the touch.

‘He’s here. I can feel it,’ he said distractedly. We finished our crisps and sat in silence. The glasses clinked as the table began tremoring. ‘Can you knock on the table?’ Neil asked in a low voice. A faint knock replied. ‘There you go,’ he said to Tracey. ‘Are you going to move this table tonight, knock once for yes, twice for no,’ he said, his voice growing confident. The response was one tap, which meant yes.

‘Why don’t you ask it the question it doesn’t like?’ Lee asked.

‘What doesn’t it like?’ Tracey whispered, leaning forward for the answer.

‘The last time we asked if it wanted help, it went mental…’ Neil was interrupted by *thump thump*, which signalled a NO, and two soft growls ensued.

Tracey gave a sharp gasp at the reaction.

‘Can you ask if it’s happy?’ *Please be happy* I thought.

‘Are you happy?’ Neil asked. The table jolted. I frowned, hoping for a better response.

‘Are you sad?’ I asked. A cool breeze touched my fingers, an ice cold hand hovering over mine. I slowly turned my hand palm up, and the coldness disappeared.

‘Ask it…’ Tracey’s voice was interrupted by the table shifting abruptly to the left. The movement was powerful and strong as if pushed hard by an invisible force. ‘Oh!’ she exclaimed loudly, pushing her seat back from the table.

Lee jumped up, ‘If it’s going to start going crazy,’ he said, eyeing the door.

‘Calm down,’ Neil said, putting his hand on Lee’s arm to steady him, ‘People are looking.’

My attention was drawn to the landlord, who was staring at a small monitor over the bar, then looking back at us. Another member of staff joined him as he pointed at the screen. I leaned forward and whispered, ‘Is he looking at us?’

Tracey nodded as she replied, ‘Yes, we’re on CCTV.’ We lowered our heads and giggled like naughty school children.

Neil seized the opportunity to request further activity. ‘Move that table without touching it.’ The table jerked suddenly, we grabbed our drinks to rescue them. ‘What did I tell you,’ he said, smugly. It was a statement, not a question. ‘Try to push it back,’ Neil said, holding his hands up so Tracey could see it was clear of human interference.

Tracey checked underneath first, then pushed hard, her face reddening with the effort. ‘It’s so strong,’ she gasped.

I rubbed my arms, which were coming up in goose bumps. ‘I can feel breezes,’ I said as I was bathed in an icy gust. Tracey and I squealed in unison as the heavy wooden table thumped against the floor and jumped towards us again. We waited a few seconds and pushed it back.

‘Are you alright?’ Tracey asked Lee. He looked uncomfortable and was glancing around the room.

‘Yeah,’ he said, shifting in his chair. ‘I’m not scared, just worried about the noise.’

‘It’s weird that creaking noise is exactly the same at every table we’ve sat,’ Josie said. The table jumped again.

‘Bloody hell Neil,’ I exclaimed, not quite sure what Neil was supposed to do about it.

Neil hid one hand behind his back while laying the other one flat on the table. ‘Tap out how many fingers I’m holding behind my back.’ The table tapped three times and Neil brought his hand around to the front, still holding up three fingers.

‘Three, well done,’ Tracey exclaimed, praising the entity for getting the answer right.

‘He’s really good at it,’ Josie said quietly, stirring a straw around her drink.

‘That’s amazing. Ask where it lives,’ Tracey said, her face alight with anticipation.

‘Do you live at my house?’ Neil asked. The table immediately thumped once, the sign for YES. ‘Have you ever been to Lee’s house?’ Neil asked.

Lee held his breath. Two taps, answer was NO. ‘Yesssss!’ Lee said, punching the air, his relief evident.

‘Do you want us to move house?’ Neil asked. The answer was a swift NO. ‘Do you want us to get out of the pub?’ Neil asked.

The table jumped in response and then thumped a YES.

Tracey joined in with a question, ‘Do you like it at Neil and Caroline’s house?’ A knock signified YES. *No surprise there.*

I jumped as my phone signalled a missed call. It was Mike. I found his number on the screen to call him back, and the table jolted towards me. I hesitated, deciding against making the call. Instead, I directed a question to the entity. ‘Have I offended you?’ The answer was NO.

We reeled off a succession of quick fire questions. ‘Do you want to be our friend?’ I asked, and sighed with relief as YES was communicated back to me. I took a sip of my drink, trying to think of questions worthy of a hotline to the other side. My mind went blank. All I could think of was asking if it was scared of the dog. The answer was YES.

We ascertained through questions and answers that the entity was born in

the sixteenth century and had a wife. When asked who was to blame for the fires, the blame most definitely lay with her. I was not convinced; blaming the activity on someone else seemed another way of keeping favour.

We stopped for a break as Neil, Lee and Josie walked outside for a cigarette. As they stood, a shrill *beep* was followed by a *Weheeew* noise. We laughed in astonishment, and the noises attracted some funny looks. Minutes later Neil, Lee and Josie returned, and a loud 'Grrrrrrrrh' growling noise followed the creaking of the door. I took a deep breath and asked, 'Did you make that growling noise as they came in?' the knock that followed meant YES. *But why?* 'Do you want to frighten us?' I said. It rapped NO. I felt my guard drop as if I was speaking to an old friend instead of the source of our torment. ' I didn't think you wanted to frighten us,' I said softly.

Tracey was listening attentively and joined in with a question. 'Do you think that was funny?' Tracey asked. The answer was YES. 'Because we laughed, didn't we?' YES came the reply.

'Are you trying to amuse us, is that it?' I asked. A loud bang for NO hit the table. 'Are you out to amuse yourself?' I asked. YES it replied. 'And why not,' I said, 'better than hanging around here all the time.' I looked across the table at my friends and felt very fortunate to be part of this world. 'Are you happy you found Neil and Lee?' YES came the answer.

Neil leaned in and asked a question, 'Will you help us let people know there is life after death?' YES came the reply. 'Is it OK if I write a book about you?' Neil said.

I fiddled with my chain uncomfortably. That question was bound to rile the unpredictable entity. Two thumps signalled a response of NO, and the taps grew into sinister two thump responses of NO, NO, NO, like the deathly rhythm of a train, *bang-bang*, *bang-bang*, on it went.

I did not like the way things were turning. 'It's OK, we don't want to offend you,' but the bangs kept coming, NO, NO, NO. 'All right we won't,' I responded as if speaking to a sullen child. The thumping noises slowed, and

then started up again. Butterflies fluttered in my stomach as I tried to placate the unhappy entity. ‘It’s OK, we can all live together and be friends.’ My pleading appeared to go unnoticed as the thumps continued. I sighed heavily with exasperation, looking to Tracey for help.

‘Why are you angry, is it because you don’t want a book being written?’ Tracey said, as the banging continued. ‘I don’t understand,’ she said, throwing her hands up.

‘It’s something he’s not happy with,’ Josie said, stating the obvious.

‘Are you angry?’ Tracey asked. It responded NO and the thumps ceased.

‘Are you happy to leave things the way things are?’ I asked. YES was the response. ‘OK, you can come down and talk to us in the pub.’ YES it responded quickly. ‘And nowhere else.’ I hastily added, regretting my earlier offer of friendship. The table tapped four times. It began to move and shift as if the entity had grown bored with us asking so many questions.

‘It just touched my leg.’ Neil jumped in surprise. *Bang*. The table shook under the strain and began to rock back and forth. Tracey and I tried to steady the table by holding it down, but it continued to rock from side to side. I looked at Neil for assistance, but he was scanning the room, embarrassed by the amount of attention we were attracting.

Lee gulped back the last of his drink and nodded towards the door as he stood to leave.

‘We’re going now, goodbye,’ I whispered hastily into thin air. The table juddered to a halt. Our exit through the front doors was signalled by a loud *beep.*

We shoved our way through the double doors to the fresh air outside and erupted into giggles. Tracey thanked us for inviting her. She turned to walk to her car and another *beep* echoed throughout the car park.

‘He’s saying goodbye,’ she chuckled. I waved her off, and told Lee we would arrange another night soon.

Questions spun like cobwebs in my head as I tried to sleep that night. I

thought of the amount of times I admonished Neil for carrying on contact with the entity, yet I was finding myself being sucked in. It was too late to turn away, and I needed answers. *Was it a lost soul, or was it manipulating us, waiting to strike?* I lifted my head to see the red glow of my bedside clock flash midnight. I closed my eyes to sleep, pushing my concerns to the back of my mind.

I arranged to attend the pub the following week with Neil and Lee, and brought a video camera in hope of filming evidence. I left the camera running for twenty minutes with no activity recorded.

'You're not going to catch it on camera, it won't let you,' Neil said.

Bored, I turned it off. A cold breeze kissed my hand as I rested it on the table. 'Can you feel that breeze?' I asked Neil.

Neil nodded in response and asked the entity a question. 'Will you ever do anything on camera?' The response was NO.

I began to pick at my drink's cardboard placemat. 'Is it because you are not allowed?' he asked. The response was NO followed by a soft sigh in my ear. I squirmed at the contact.

'Is your wife with us?' Lee asked. It tapped YES. Lee mentioned hearing female voices in the past, and he seemed convinced the entity had a wife.

'Are you planning on leaving anytime soon?' I asked. Two sharp raps answered my question, signalling NO. I laughed nervously, not exactly the answer I was hoping for.

Lee interjected, 'Never mind soon, are you *ever* planning on leaving?' The response was YES. Lee smiled, the relief visible on his face.

I tried to reason with the entity. 'I think you should. I think you would probably be happier. It can't be very nice. Living in a place where no one…' My sentence was interrupted by a sigh followed by numerous tapping noises, which were growing stronger.

Neil flashed me a worried look.

'I'm going to stop talking now,' I said, sinking back into my chair. Tap,

tap, tap, they continued. I bit my lip, wishing I'd remembered any offer of help or sympathy was one sure fire way of pissing off our communicator.

Lee chuckled. 'We will have this with us forever.'

Neil leaned into the table, 'Are you happy with me and Lee?' YES knocked the response. 'Do you like Chris,' Neil asked. The NO response was immediate. 'He never does like Chris,' Neil said, crunching ice cubes in his mouth. I recalled Neil telling me the entity had always communicated a dislike for his friend, although he did not know why.

'Well don't mention me,' I warned. I did not want to know the answer to *that* question. Lee gestured to Neil and said, 'Do you like both of us?' The response was YES.

'Sad though, isn't it. Do you not think?' I said, my sympathy returning.

Neil shrugged, unconcerned. 'Are you happy?' he said, and it tapped YES in reply.

'Yes?' I said in surprise, looking at the empty seats across from us, imagining our invisible guest sitting and watching.

Lee shook his head, 'I don't know how.'

I picked at the last of the placemat. 'I don't know either, I can't imagine that.'

'Are you trapped?' Lee asked. The response was YES.

Perhaps a medium could help free it, I thought, wondering how to word it without offending our communicator. I took a deep breath, 'I'm not going to ask for help…' I was interrupted by tapping, softly at first, then gaining momentum. I opened my mouth to speak, and Neil shot me a warning look, 'No, don't.' But it was too late. He read my mind, I thought as the taps gained intensity and the large heavy table began rocking from side to side. Nerves bubbled up inside me at the show of strength and I immediately retracted my statement. 'I said I wasn't going to ask,' I stammered. *Bang.* The table jumped in reaction to the invisible weight raining down.' Oh! Fucking hell,' I swore, the ferocity of the bangs shook me from my

complacency. *Bang*. The table jumped again. *Such strength, what if it uses that force on us?* We tried to hold down the table by leaning on it, but it was no use. It was going to break if this carried on. 'All right,' I said, the entity had made its feelings very clear.

'Say Sorry,' Neil whispered through gritted teeth. The table lifted an inch from the ground in response, and banged loudly as its weight struck the floor. I felt as if I was trying to control a bucking bronco. Onlookers at the bar craned their heads in our direction.

I leaned on the table and whispered, 'Sorry! I'm sorry. I didn't say it out loud. I wasn't going to ask, I *didn't* ask. If you are happy that's up to you.' The response was two more violent bangs as the table shuddered under the strain.

Neil stood up, his brow furrowed in annoyance. 'Fucking Hell, people are looking, let's go.'

'Right,' I whispered sternly to thin air, as if telling off a naughty child, 'we're leaving now. It's getting out of hand.' I picked up my bag and followed the others towards the door. A loud *beep* made my shoulders jerk upwards. I looked down, too embarrassed to take in the onlooker's expressions of bewilderment. *Beep,* it went again. We stood outside the pub wondering what to do next. *Kicked out of a pub for the first time in my life – by a ghost.* I felt well and truly admonished. It was my fault the evening had come to such an abrupt end, and I wanted to know why. 'Why does it get so angry when we offer help?' I asked Neil, waving away the offer of a cigarette.

'It's OK, he's done that with us too. It's natural to want to help, but we don't know what we're dealing with. Mike has a theory that the entity thinks of us as inferior, here for his entertainment. It sees itself as way more powerful than us. The fact we would offer help is an insult.' I nodded slowly as I tried to take it in. Were we just playthings to a powerful force? Neil and Lee decided to attend another pub, after dropping me off home. I needed time

to think; my quest for answers left me more confused than ever before.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

A Fearful Journey

Manifestations continued in the pub. Even going to the toilet was an opportunity for activity as the door handle was depressed back and forth, only for Neil to rush it open to find nobody there. Bawls rang through the air as the sounds grew in strength. Pub customers sometimes reacted with alarm, but most of the time it went unnoticed due to their joviality or disbelief.

Things took an unwanted twist one balmy Sunday evening, when Neil's brother Mark offered to drive to the pub. Neil jumped in the passenger seat and turned around to greet Chris and Lee who were sitting behind him. Minutes into the journey Neil shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

'What's wrong with you?' Mark asked.

'It's poking me,' Neil replied, as a bony finger poked his back. 'Ow, stop it.'

'We'll be there in a minute,' Mark said.

'Oh fucking hell, this thing is pulling my jacket, it's pushing the car seat up from underneath too.' Neil strained against his seat belt and clutched his side. 'Oh! It's grabbing me. I don't like it, stop the car.' Fear grabbed Neil like a vice, and he struggled to stay calm. He dialled Mike's number to speak to him, but conversation was difficult as the prods and pokes became stronger.

Mark tried to calm Neil down, 'Just hang on, we'll be there in a minute.'

Lee squirmed in his seat. 'It's grabbing me too, it's pulling my hood.'

Chris intervened, 'Calm down guys, we're nearly there.'

Neil squealed as icy fingers bit hard into his flesh, pinching his sides. 'Stop

it, I don’t like it!’ he shouted. With no apparent response, he turned to his brother. ‘Mark, stop the car, I need to get out.’ Pandemonium ensued as both Neil and Lee continued to be attacked by invisible hands.

‘Get off me!’ Lee shouted, rocking the car as he bounced in his seat, kicking out into thin air.

‘He’s punching me. No, please stop,’ Neil begged as blows mercilessly rained down on his head. Neil undid the buckle of his safety belt and reached for the door handle in panic. ‘I’ve got to get out of here. Please, Mark stop the car!’

Mark screeched the car to a halt and pulled over on the side of the road. Clouds of dust rose from the dirt track.

Neil and Lee stumbled out of the car, waving off their attacker as if chased by an angry swarm of bees. After catching their breath, Neil and Lee sat back in the car. Mark turned the ignition and pushed it into gear, driving towards the pub in sight. As Mark drove, the ding ding of the car alarm signalled that Neil had not buckled his seat belt. He was too busy bracing himself from further attack.

‘Oh here we go, it’s started again,’ Neil jolted in his seat, trying to avoid the pinches and grabs, ‘get off me,’ he shouted between clenched teeth.

‘It’s OK, we’re here now,’ Mark said as he pulled into the pub car park. The men quickly alit from the car and entered the pub.

Mark was in awe of the activity. ‘What did it feel like?’ he asked, placing the drinks on the table.

‘Awful,’ Neil replied. ‘I could feel its fingers when it pinched me.’

‘Did it hurt you?’

Neil rubbed his head as he replied, ‘It hurt at the time, like a kind of burning sensation.’

Mark cocked his shaven head to one side, ‘Huh, I’d like to feel it.’

‘Stick your hand under the table and you will,’ Neil said as he watched the grin evaporate from Mark’s face. After some persuading, Mark slowly put his

hand under the table. He was rewarded with an ice-cold grasp. Mark pulled his hand back as if electrified. ‘Shit,’ Mark said, shaking his hand. ‘That was weird.’

Chris and Lee nodded. It was a game they played many times before. ‘It grabbed my hand once, and I tried to pull it back, just to see what it looked like,’ Chris said, ‘but it let go.’

‘Sod that,’ Mark said, still uneasy from the contact.

‘It’s pretty amazing though,’ Chris said.

Neil nodded. He had no intention of putting his hand under the table. He did not want to play that game anymore.

The following week Neil arrived home after picking up his car from the garage. He frowned, deep in thought. He had applied to become a taxi driver but the odds seemed against him as everything went wrong. His car was due for a mechanical test and was causing him countless problems. Warning lights flashed across the dashboard, but after running extensive tests, they were unable to find anything wrong. He dropped the car keys on the dining room table along with the new satellite navigation system he bought the day before. A few minutes later he returned to the dining room and noticed both items missing. Despite turning the house inside out, both items seemed to have disappeared into the ether.

His stress grew as the debts mounted. It cost hundreds of pounds to research unknown faults with his car, replace his missing sat nav, and replace his car key. His newly fitted taxi meter refused to work and had to be changed. Was the entity doing everything it could to stop him going to work? His questions appeared to be answered the next day as he drove to Colchester to change his taxi meter. Lee asked if he could come along for the trip. Neil was happy to have the company and chatted as they drove. Banging noises coming from the rear of the car interrupted their conversation. Neil strained to listen.

‘Can you hear that?’ he asked, turning down the radio.

‘Sounds like it’s coming from the boot,’ Lee said, listening intently.

Neil searched for a place to pull over, but the road was too busy. His palms became clammy on the steering wheel. The last thing he wanted was an incident while he was driving. A loud clunk reverberated throughout the vehicle as something heavy hit the roof of the car.

‘What the hell?’ Lee said. ‘You better pull over mate.’

‘I’m trying,’ Neil said, parking the car on some wasteland at the side of the road. He jumped out of the car, wary of the oncoming traffic. His magnetic taxi sign, which had been fitted the week before, was no longer on the roof of the car.

Lee opened his door and stared, mesmerised. The sign clung to the side of the car and on the roof was a tin of paint.

Neil’s voice lowered to a whisper, ‘He must have been trying to take it off, but it was too strong.’ The tin of paint sitting on top of the car dispelled any thoughts that the sign was faulty. ‘Help me with this,’ Neil grunted as traffic zoomed by. He did not have time to think as he strained to place the magnetic taxi sign back on the roof. He grabbed the half empty tin of paint and threw it back in the boot where it came from. Neil sat back into the car and made the appointment with minutes to spare.

An hour later, Neil stood back and admired the fitter’s handiwork. The meter worked, his car was ready, and a tingle of pleasure ran through him as he looked forward to working again. His satisfaction was short-lived however, when his thoughts returned to the incident earlier that day. Neil paid for the work and climbed back into the car, praying for an uneventful journey. He drove in silence, trying to negotiate his way out of traffic. His concentration was broken as strange noises reverberated throughout the car.

‘Can you hear that?’ Lee whispered anxiously.

‘I can hear it,’ Neil said, quickly glancing upwards, ‘it’s moving in the roof lining.’ Neil pressed his foot on the accelerator. *If I can just get home.* His thoughts were interrupted by the *pop, pop, pop* noises of metal being

depressed inside the car. The car panels began to bang louder, as if being punched. Neil turned up the radio and sped home, ignoring the commotion. Relief swept over him as he pulled into his drive unharmed. He ran his hand over the car expecting dents, but there were none. ‘Would you like to come in for a coffee?’ Neil asked Lee, who appeared shaken. He felt bad about the house ban and reasoned a coffee would only take a few minutes. Lee nodded. Neil glanced at his car window. Something was missing. ‘Where’s my tax disc?’ Neil asked, scanning the inside of the car.

‘Dunno mate.’ They bent down to look inside the car but it was gone. Neil found the empty holder under the passenger seat, but the disc was nowhere to be found. He groaned at the setback.

‘I’ve had enough of this, I’m going inside,’ Neil said, stomping towards the front door. Joe was upstairs babysitting. Neil trotted upstairs and popped his head into their room. Joe and David were engrossed in a computer game and barely acknowledged him. He walked downstairs to join Lee, who was rolling a collection of cigarettes at the table. Neil sighed, wondering if inviting Lee inside was such a good idea after all. He was tired and just wanted to rest. *A few minutes won’t do any harm*, his inner voice said.‘Coming for a cigarette?’ Neil asked, taking a cigarette from his pocket.

Lee nodded and picked out one of the thin spears he just created.

As they got to the back door Neil noticed the key was gone. He shouted for Joe, who came running down the stairs. Joe had no idea where the key had gone, and worse still, the back door was locked. ‘You must have forgotten where you put it,’ Neil said. Joe opened his mouth in protest when something dropped from the ceiling and hit the ground between them. It was the key. Joe looked at Neil open mouthed. ‘It’s OK, just ignore it,’ Neil advised.

Joe did not need to be told twice, and went back upstairs.

Neil and Lee drew on their cigarettes in the garden, and returned inside. Neil gasped as a handful of breakfast cereal materialised from nowhere and hit Lee on the back of the head.

Lee crouched in response to the unexpected tiny missiles.

‘Mate, it’s cereal. I saw it come from nowhere,’ Neil said, pointing to the cereal on the ground.

Lee exhaled in amazement. After everything he witnessed it would take more than a few rice krispies to frighten him.

Neil swept up the mess and entered the living room. ‘Oh, will you look at this,’ he said, examining the kitchen door. Five fingerprints were daubed on the door in thick white antiseptic cream. Neil recalled the open jar being in the living room the night before as one of the children used it to treat a small burn. Crudely daubed fingerprints also decorated the living room door. Neil stepped back as something came hurtling towards Lee from the kitchen, hitting him squarely on the back of the head.

‘Ow!’ Lee rubbed the back of his head and spun around to confront his attacker. Neil picked up the half empty pot of cream, which had bounced across the floor, fingerprints clearly visible from inside where the thick cream had been scooped out. ‘Are you OK, Lee?’ Lee rubbed the back of his head.

‘Yeah I’m all right, I don’t think he wants me here.’ Neil did not have to ask whom Lee was referring to, and regretted asking his friend inside. ‘I’ll just finish rolling this cigarette and then I’ll head off,’ Lee said as he deposited the tobacco into the tiny paper and expertly rolled it into a perfect cigarette.

Neil took his tobacco pouch from his pocket and handed it to Lee. ‘Here mate, any chance you can quickly make one for me before you go? I can’t get the hang of it.’

Lee smiled and held his hand out. ‘Okay, hand it over.’

Lee’s smile evaporated when he opened the pouch, ‘Ugh what’s this? Is this a joke?’

Neil peered into the pouch, and the smell of tomato ketchup wafted up his nostrils. ‘It smells like ketchup. I certainly didn’t put it there, bloody six quid that pack cost me.’ Neil jumped as the smoke alarms beeped into life, filling

him with dread. He ran out to the kitchen in panic. Lee jumped up from the table to follow him, but there was no sign of any fire. He opened the door to the hall to see the orange glow of flames rising from his white tracksuit top hung on the banisters.

‘Open the front door,’ Neil shouted, grabbing the flaming clothing.

‘I can’t!’ Lee rattled the door handle, ‘it’s bloody locked, and the key’s gone.’

This cannot be happening, Neil thought, turning for the back door with the flaming garment. Just then, the front door key dropped from overhead.

Lee grabbed it and shoved it into the door, twisting it quickly to unlock it.

‘Quick,’ Neil shouted, the flames licking his fingers.

Lee pulled the door open, and stood back as Neil threw the garment on the front driveway.

Neil jumped in surprise as Lee slapped him violently on his back.

‘You’re on fire,’ Lee shouted. Neil twisted his head around to look at his back to see a small scorched circle, which Lee extinguished.

‘I saw it start,’ Lee said, breathless. ‘It was a little ring of fire, it came from nowhere.’

‘Jesus,’ Neil said under his breath, trying to comprehend what just occurred. Neil quickly checked on the children. They were oblivious to the carnage and he did not want to worry them. He entered his bedroom and pulled a T-shirt from his wardrobe. Taking off the burned top, he poked his finger through the round scorch mark. He should not have asked Lee inside, and it was a miracle nobody had been hurt.

Neil walked downstairs to speak to Lee in the sitting room.

Lee stood up, pushing his hands deep in his jeans pockets. ‘Guess I’d better be off then,’ he said.

Neil nodded in reply, his eyes cast downwards. They made arrangements for their next meet up in the pub and Lee made his way towards the front door. Neil opened the door, Lee stared behind his shoulder. Neil turned to see

a yellow puddle on the hall floor behind him, the same as before. His eyes darted to the stairs to see three sodden prints going up the stairs. *I'm not afraid*, Neil thought defiantly. A controlled calmness took over as he shouted up to the children to check their welfare. They replied with impatience that they were fine.

'Do you want a hand cleaning up?' Lee asked.

'No mate, it's just trying to frighten me. I think it's best if you go, I'll ring you later.'

Lee nodded, giving the footsteps a backward glance. He visibly shuddered, and turned to leave.

Closing the door behind him, Neil leaned against it, taking steadying breaths. Grabbing his camera, he took photos of the stairs, leaning in close to capture the footprints. Neil sniffed then recoiled. It had the same stale smell as before. *Where the hell is it getting this from?* Neil cleaned the mess, then sat down and plugged the camera lead into the laptop. The photos flashed up on screen, and one in particular drew his attention. He peered closer, trying to establish what it was. He recognised it as being in the series of photos, which he had taken of the footprints on the stairs. But this was different. A swirling circular motion surrounded a round white pattern. Neil frowned. What the hell had he captured on camera? He magnified the photo to see a small round white shape, resembling a small cloud on the bottom right hand corner. He saved the photo and emailed it to Mike.

Neil's phone lit up within seconds. He ran through the events of the day. There was no mistaking the astonishment in Mike's voice. 'I've analysed the photo and it's no camera malfunction. You've captured something amazing there.'

'What do you think it is?' Neil asked.

'Mate, it looks almost as if you've captured a picture of a portal. This could be the gateway for the paranormal activity in your home.'

CHAPTER TWENTY

The Exorcism

After months of waiting on the Catholic Church, Neil's brother Mark decided enough was enough. 'Put your coat on, we're going to see the priest.'

I rubbed my forehead in an effort to stave away a growing headache. 'You go ahead Neil, I'll stay here with the children.'

Just over an hour later, the slamming of our front door signalled Neil's return. He climbed the stairs to join me on the landing. I peeped over my basket of dirty washing to see he was smiling. 'It's all sorted, we met with Father Luke,' Neil said, taking the basket from my hands and walking downstairs to the kitchen. 'After all this time he asked what he could do for us.'

I shook my head.'What did you say?'

'We went into his living quarters at the side of the church, and Mark explained things had escalated. Father Luke began to speak when three loud thumps hit the ground in front of him as if someone was stomping with heavy boots on the carpet. We hadn't moved an inch. He looked surprised and asked what it was. I said, "That's him." I didn't really know what to call it, but it registered with Father Luke quickly enough.'

My eyebrows shot up in surprise. 'What did he do?'

'He jumped up and looked flustered. Then there were more loud thumps, this time on the walls, like someone was really hammering with their fists, but stronger. Father Luke said it shouldn't be happening as his room was part of the church. Then he said it was serious, and something needed to be done about it.' Neil flashed me an ironic smile.

I exhaled with relief. At last we were being taken seriously.

‘He prayed over me, Mark and Lee as the noises continued. When he was finished he looked in his dresser. He handed me a phone number and told me to ring it, saying they are the priests we need to speak to about the exorcism. I think he was glad to get rid of us, he seemed quite shaken by it all.’ Neil shoved his hand in his pocket and pulled out the folded notepaper to show me. ‘Mark came back to Mum’s with me, and Lee went home. I called the number and a priest named Father *Hill answered. We had a chat and he told me they are qualified to perform exorcisms. He wants you to email everything to him, and we will visit them in two weeks’ time to talk about it further. They live near Ilford, just outside of London.’

I folded my arms and leaned back in my chair. ‘I hope they can help.’

Two weeks later we made our way to Ilford. I was distracted throughout the two-hour journey, my feelings playing a tennis match between hope and trepidation. Neil was just tired. The thoughts of going through the story again made him weary. I hoped we would not be judged too harshly, given we did not attend church as often as we should. The Church was situated in a built up area, which looked as if it had its fair share of troubles. A tower block of flats loomed on the opposite side of the road, the gloomy streets littered with people.

‘We’re a bit early,’ I said as Neil drove into the gravelled churchyard. ‘Do you want to wait, or will we give a knock?’

‘We may as well let them know we’re here. Just let me have a cigarette first.’ Neil stepped outside the car and cupped his hands over the lighter.

‘I wonder if the priest will be OK with us.’ I held my hands over Neil’s as he tried for the third time to light his cigarette in the breeze. ‘I hope he doesn’t ask how many times we go to church.’ I was still stinging from the phone call with my local priest. Since then, my appearances at church had been sporadic.

‘They probably will,’ Neil leaned back against the car and drew on his

cigarette. ‘But the number of times I’ve been to church is the least of my worries.’ Neil stubbed his cigarette into the gravel, and we walked to the side door of the building. A stout middle-aged priest with short greying hair answered the door, a broad smile lighting up his face. He introduced himself as Father Hill.

‘It’s good to meet you at last, Father,’ I said, referring to the emails and phone calls that had passed between us in the two-week interval.

‘Come in, come in,’ he said, ushering us into a side room. ‘Will you be alright to wait in here for a bit, we’re not quite ready?’

‘Of course,’ I nodded. We entered the small windowless room and sat on wooden chairs placed against the wall.

Father Hill closed the door behind us.

I sniffed the damp air and glanced at the large cross and religious paintings on the wall. A large statue of the Virgin Mary stared back at us mournfully, her hands by her sides, palms upwards.

Neil woke me from my thoughts as he whispered, ‘It’s like your mother’s house.’

I smiled. I was accustomed to religious pictures adorning the walls where I grew up. Most houses in Ireland had them. I had a feeling Neil was a little intimidated. ‘They’re just pictures,’ I whispered, fiddling with my hair. ‘What do you think he meant when he said they ‘weren’t quite ready?’

Neil shrugged. ‘I don’t know. I thought we just came here to talk about it. I didn’t know there was anyone else involved.’ Neil nibbled his nails as we waited. Minutes passed.

I elbowed Neil sharply as Father Hill opened the door. ‘Thank you for waiting, please follow me.’ We followed him into a large room off the church, which I imagined was used as a church hall. I was surprised to see a full alter had been made up. Another priest, dressed in purple robes, was also present. Although short in stature, he looked as if he meant business. He introduced himself as Father *Rafael and shook our hands firmly, his face

deadly serious.

A tall grey haired man joined us. I guessed from his casual dress that he was not a priest. He introduced himself as *Bill and shook my hand, giving me a smile and a reassuring wink. I smiled back and turned my attention to the woman beside him. She introduced herself as *Mary and explained they were lay people involved in the church through prayer groups. I shook her hand, happy to hear the lilt of an Irish accent from her lips.

Introductions made, Father Hill and Father Rafael sat behind a long wooden table. They gestured at us to sit on the opposite end, while Mary and Bill sat on either side of us. It all felt very formal, and my nerves grew as I took my place beside Neil.

Father Rafael opened a folder containing printouts of all the e-mails I sent Father Hill and asked us to recount our story. For the next half hour we spoke about what had been happening in our lives. I felt sorry for Neil as he recounted the story once again. The priests nodded and explained that they regularly dealt with occurrences such as these, although none as severe as ours.

‘You say you have communicated with it. Has it ever given its name?’ Father Raphael asked, pointing his pen in Neil’s direction.

‘No,’ Neil said. ‘We have asked many times, but it refuses.’

Father Rafael nodded in recognition, ‘Demons never do.’ He clasped his hands together on the table and carried on. ‘We can help rid you of it, but there is one stipulation. Many people ask us for help, but unless they are part of our church we cannot assist them. Do you attend church?’

I squirmed as I disclosed I did not go as often as I liked due to shift work. I did not tell them my faith in the Catholic Church was crumbling, and my belief in God was one of a loving presence, rather than a judgemental one.

Neil shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

‘And do you have communion when you attend Church?’ Father Rafael asked, his eyes boring into me. ‘I can’t take communion Father, I was

divorced when I met Neil.' The church frowned upon divorce and I hoped it would not stop them from helping us. The priests murmured to each other under their breath. They then explained that they would have to amend the situation. That would involve Neil and I living in chastity until I got my first marriage annulled, and then married Neil in a church. Only then would I be married in the eyes of God.

'We know it will take great… Sacrifice,' Father Hill said, giving a short cough. 'You must live in chastity as brother and sister until you become married in the eyes of God.'

My head snapped up as I looked at the priest in surprise. I held back a laugh as I realised he was serious. The priest suggested they could make arrangements for me to speak to the Bishop to get the annulment underway. The idea seemed ludicrous. I resisted the urge to look at Neil, but I could imagine what he was thinking. I nodded my head. At that moment I would agree to anything to get help. Formalities over, the priests announced it was time for the exorcism. They gestured to Neil and I to join them at the altar. I was taken aback by the idea and gave Neil a cursory glance.

We sat on two chairs facing the altar while the remainder of the group stood around us. For the next two hours the priests and lay people poured prayers and healing over us. A warm energy emanated from their hands as they hovered over me. They spoke in tongues and the rhythmic chanting of syllables was strangely comforting. Their bibles were laid open and many prayers were made casting out demons in the name of God. Holy water was sprinkled, and after two hours, the session came to an end. The priests looked exhausted as they closed their bibles.

'How do you feel?' Father Hill asked Neil at the end of the session.

'Fine,' Neil said. 'I felt him here, but then he went. The problem is I think he can come and go as he pleases.'

'Yes, well we will arrange to attend the house also when we can arrange the time,' Father Hill said.

We thanked them and left. I took Neil's arm as we walked to our car. Neil opened his mouth to speak and I shushed him, worried we were still in earshot. I flashed him a mischievous smile, feeling twelve years old again. We climbed into the car and closed the doors.

'I wasn't expecting all that,' Neil said in hushed tones. 'I thought we were just meeting up for a chat.'

I exhaled, 'God yeah, that was very serious wasn't it.'

Neil started the car and drove out of the churchyard.

'So what did you think when the priest said we had to live as brother and sister?' I asked with a grin.

Neil laughed, 'I thought he was joking until I saw the expression on his face.'

'Me too,' I giggled.

'So are you going to go for an annulment then?' Neil said.

'They really put me on the spot,' I said. 'But it wouldn't be right, there's no reason to annul my first marriage, it was right at the time.'

Neil nodded, 'It's a bit harsh though, turning people away if they don't follow their beliefs.'

'I know, I thought the same. Still, they did their best to help us,' I yawned, leaning back in my seat. Neil focused on the road, and we drove in silence. I closed my eyes, wondering if I had dreamt the whole thing.

The next day my work colleague Tracey asked how my day off had been. I smiled. 'Let me put it like this. Most couples go out for a curry on their days off, we went out for an exorcism.' I could not help but laugh. Strange was becoming our new normal. Still, I knew that as long as I had the support of my friends, I would get through it.

A few weeks later I got back in touch with the priests. The exorcism helped, but the entity was still in our lives. They arranged to attend our house. I felt immensely grateful they were still on board, and a time was arranged. Mike had been in touch and asked if he could attend. I was not so sure. Mike

had been very against the idea of us having an exorcism, but changed his mind after emailing Father Hill. Despite their communications, I did not think the priests would appreciate an audience. Neil arranged for Lee, Mark and Chris to attend as they were also heavily involved.

The priests arrived mid morning, bringing two helpers. I recognised Mary, who was dressed in pastels and wore a bright gold cross around her neck. The second lady was introduced as *Noreen. The elderly lady had a gentle handshake and a kind face.

Our introductions were cut short as Father Rafael entered the room, obviously displeased. He grimaced at the sight of our guests. ‘I must say, I was not expecting all these people to be here,’ he said, stiffly.

Neil reasoned that everybody present was key to what occurred, particularly Lee. Father Rafael did not agree, and a disagreement ensued. As they reasoned back and forth on who should be present, nobody seemed to notice Mary, who was gasping for breath as she clutched a hand to her chest.

‘Are you alright?’ I asked.

‘I cannot stay here,’ she panted, as her eyes darted towards the door.

Father Hill finished putting his hand through the sleeve of his robes and took her arm in concern. ‘Mary,’ he began to say.

‘There’s an evil presence, I cannot stay in this house!’ she screamed and bolted out the front door. I watched through our front window as Mary ran down the road with Father Hill chasing after her, his clerical clothing billowing in the breeze. The neighbours have seen everything, police, fire engines, investigators and now priests running out of this house. What next? I thought, hoping Mary would return.

A few minutes later Mary returned with a breathless Father Hill, thanks to some calming words. It was decided that Lee, Chris, and Mark could be present but Mike and his co-investigator John could not as they were not Catholics. Mike had recently converted to the Muslim faith, and did not see any problem as he reasoned that he would not interfere. But Father Rafael

was adamant. He would not stay and perform an exorcism while Mike and John were present. The two men reluctantly walked outside as fresh embarrassment washed over me. It was not a good start. I offered refreshments, but the group was keen to get things underway.

They set up an altar in the dining room, and we all stood around them, our heads bowed in respect. They began by tracing the sign of the cross over everyone present. Holy water was sprinkled as prayers were said. The words were similar to those spoken at the vestry. The litany of the saints followed as each saint was called upon and we responded, 'pray for us' in return. The litany progressed to Father Hill reciting the antiphon, 'Do not keep in mind, o Lord, our offences or those of our parents, nor take vengeance on our sins.' As the priest invoked the help of God, his angels and the saints, I half hoped the entity would show itself. Perhaps then they could see what we were dealing with, and banish it from our lives forever. We recited the Lord's Prayer, and the priests continued to read many psalms.

Father Rafael's voice took on a commanding tone as he spoke directly to the 'demon'. 'I command you, unclean spirit, whoever you are, along with all your minions now attacking this servant of God, by the mysteries of the incarnation, passion, resurrection and ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ, by the descent of the Holy Spirit, by the coming of our Lord for judgement, that you tell me by some sign your name, and the day and hour of your departure, I command you, moreover to obey me by the letter, I who am a minister of God, despite my unworthiness, nor shall you be emboldened to harm in any way this creature of God, or the bystanders or their possessions.'

I glanced at Mary. She was standing halfway through the kitchen and dining room while I stood across from her. Father Rafael began blessing water and salt on the dining room table as Mary swayed on her feet. She uttered a small gasp as she wobbled and fell onto the hard tiled floor. The priests carried on, ignoring the fact she appeared to have fainted and was emitting small moans. I wondered why nobody was helping her. Cautiously, I

interrupted the prayers and whispered to Father Hill, ‘Is she alright? Does she need help?’

Father Hill kept his gaze firmly fixed on his Bible, breaking his prayer only to whisper, ‘Leave her, she’ll be alright.’

Noreen crouched down to Mary and held her hand. She nodded to reassure me, and the prayers carried on.

I shot a look at Neil and shrugged in return. After five minutes Mary recovered and took her place within the group. I quietly asked if she was all right and she whispered softly that she had been ‘under attack.’

A little while later, two chairs were brought into the living room side by side, and Neil and I were asked to sit on them.

‘How do you feel?’ the priests asked Neil.

He responded by rubbing the back of his neck. ‘Just a strong burning feeling on my back when you were praying, nothing else.’

The priests stood behind us and placed their hands on our heads. I strained to listen as I heard Father Rafael whisper to Father Hill, ‘Be careful, we may have to restrain Neil.’ My pulse quickened, not least out of concern for Father Rafael; he was quite short and thin, I could not imagine how he would manage to restrain Neil if the entity decided to become violent through him.

I need not have worried. Neil did not move. Further prayers were administered and they spoke in tongues, whispering unknown syllables in prayer.

I tried hard to concentrate, but after a while my mind began to wander. I listened to the cars outside, driving past our house. *Little do they know what’s taking place in the ordinary looking house at the side of the road*. The priests moved on to praying in the garden and in every room throughout the house. They ended the session by blessing the car on our drive.

As they flicked the holy water over the bonnet of the car, I had another *what must the neighbours be thinking* moment, but consoled myself that at least they were being thorough. Mike and John were allowed back inside, and

Neil and I thanked the priests and their helpers for their time. They refused to accept any payment after spending the entire morning with us. I hoped they had been successful in their mission. If the exorcism did not work, then I did not know what would.

Neil apologised to Mike that he was not allowed to witness proceedings. Mike took it with grace and shrugged his shoulders. ‘Don’t worry about it mate, it’s not your fault.’ As Mike walked inside he whispered something to Neil that chilled me to the bone. ‘To be honest mate, I think it was outside with us most of the time, the amount of banging against your fence and the stones being thrown… well, I think he was just biding his time.’

Neil

My life is separated into two parts, before the entity and afterwards. Everything I thought I knew about life changed from that day. I now know there is so much more to our existence than we can ever imagine. Death does not frighten me anymore. People can come up with all the theories they want, but I know whatever attacked me was a real being, with a separate intelligence and personality. I've felt its fingers dig into me, I've heard its voice and I have smelt its presence. It was very strong, manipulative, had a brilliant sense of humor, capable of great cruelty, and had its own agenda.

We waited for repercussions after the exorcism, but nothing happened. Still, I sensed the presence lurking in the background. The gaps between activity grew longer as it seemed to lose momentum. The entity gave one final display of strength before it left the pub for good. It had been a very active night, and I recall hearing it in the background during a telephone conversation with Mike. I went outside with Lee for a cigarette, holding my voice recorder. Without warning, the aluminum garden chairs screeched towards me, and suddenly, several of them were thrown in my direction, all at once. I jumped out of the way and grabbed for my voice recorder, which fell on the floor. When I played it back, the gravelly voice said, 'I'm going to fucking get you if it's the last thing I do.'

Lee moved away and gradually we lost touch. We knew it was for the best, after everything that happened, I understood why he would want to move on with his life. Unless you are attacked by something you cannot see or understand, then you cannot truly appreciate just how frightening it is.

I am very grateful for the friends and family that have stuck by me when I was at my lowest. I know it did not just affect me, but everyone around me.

Having said that, there are times I have felt very alone. All I have ever wanted is answers. I nearly drove myself mad trying to find them, and it caused a lot of friction in my family. It became addictive. No matter how much communication I had with the entity, it was one step forward and two steps back. I now realise it never intended on giving us answers, and was only stringing us along until the next big thing, when our lives would be put in danger. You have got to know when to walk away from something like this, but it's difficult.

I don't think I will ever be fully free, but we have managed to get to a point where we are safe, and for that I am very grateful. We still have odd occurrences, but after three years we have learned to cope.

I know some people will doubt us, or say we are making it all up. It's hard coming out to a world not fully open to the possibilities. But it's for this very reason that our story needs to be told. People need to know this sort of thing happens to ordinary people, just like us. I hope that by getting out story out there, people will gain a greater knowledge of the paranormal and develop a better understanding when it comes to helping innocent victims.

A last word of warning. Don't dabble. Don't play with Ouija boards, and don't invite anything into your life because it's fun at the time, as once you open that door it may never close again.

Caroline

I've always been told I have a way with words, but I never imagined I would express them in this way. A year after it all begun, Neil asked me if I would write a book about our experiences. I was desperately trying to block everything paranormal out of my consciousness, and said no. He never gave up asking, and after a few months I began to put a rough draft together. When the entity became active I hid the draft away. When it stopped, I picked it up again. One night I was writing a chapter when an icy cold presence stood behind me. It travelled from my back, to over my hands as I typed. I tried to shake it off and put it down to an overactive imagination, but when Neil came in, he noticed his handheld recorder had been switched on by itself. He played it back to reveal a loud growl, obviously directed towards me. I put the manuscript away for a long time after that.

I'm glad I waited. I felt a lot stronger when I picked it up again, and writing our story was a way of retaliation. I felt angry our family had been put through so much stress and disruption, not to mention the arguments it caused within our family unit. I am happy to say we have come out of it a lot stronger as a result.

The exorcism became a major turning point for us. Instead of feeling a heavy presence in the house I felt peace. I knew we were not alone, but there was something in the air, something good and pure that reassured me. It's a beautiful energy, and has been with me ever since.

Writing this book has not been easy. Much of the dialogue in the pub is taken directly from voice recordings Neil accumulated on his recorder. So much has happened over the last three years, I did not want to list every movement, every item thrown, or every strange phone call. A list of hundreds

of occurrences would only serve to bore; therefore I tried to keep the story as interesting as possible by including the most memorable events. I know this approach may disappoint those wishing to read the account on an evidential basis, but I am confident our investigator Mike Hallowell has that side of it in hand. He has been thorough with regards collaborating evidence from the beginning, and I am sure his findings will be of great fascination for many.

The ‘entity’s’ true identity is open to interpretation, and it has been given many different labels from people depending on their religion and belief system. We have never claimed to know what it is, but it *is* beyond the comprehension of many.

I am not writing this story to frighten people, although I assume some will find it disturbing. I write it in the hope that it will provide comfort to those who have experienced strange occurrences in their own lives, and I would like them to know they are not alone. I will never forget the feeling of feeling so desperate, so desolate as a family with nowhere to turn. There were times when I honestly believed it would not stop until it possessed my husband or ended his life. Writing about those experiences has been heart-wrenching for me, and there is many a chapter in this book I have found difficult to pen, due to the emotions it rekindled.

There were times when I felt like holding back information as I knew it would be deemed as ‘too far fetched’ or ‘unbelievable’ by many. Neil encouraged me to tell the whole story, and looking back now, I agree it was the right thing to do. It is my greatest wish that victims of paranormal attack are treated with the respect and compassion they deserve, and that by writing this book, it will encourage others to come forward and share their stories also.

Mark Coughlan

When Neil first called to say he was being haunted, I just thought, ‘Here we go, what’s he up to now?’ I thought he was playing some kind of a prank on me, and it just seemed too far-fetched to believe. I guess the first time he called, he wasn’t that worried, so I didn’t think much of it.

The next time he telephoned, he sounded really scared. This made me listen. Each time he became more and more frightened, and when he mentioned the knife I thought ‘This is serious.’ Strangely enough, I remember feeling jealous as he was getting to experience all these amazing things and I wasn’t. Even though it sounded frightening, it was something out of this world too. I wanted to see it for myself. I drove from London to Neil’s house that night, and my whole perspective on life changed from the moment I experienced it for myself.

Of course, I was faced with the same problem when I returned home as I tried to explain it to my wife, Kirsty. Small things happened in my house after I’d been to see Neil, or when things were very active. Kirsty hated it, and did not want to talk about it. My two daughters were very frightened of it all. Once, when we visited Neil’s house something growled in my youngest daughter’s ear. It left her in tears and she hasn’t been back there since. She wasn’t imagining it as her grandfather took me to the side and said he heard it too. Another time they received calls on their mobile phones with weird noises in the background. I remember them screaming at me, ‘Why are you bringing this thing into our house?’

Sometimes I stayed over for a vigil with Mike and the others. I hated the feeling of walking towards a room and not knowing what was inside. I’d hear banging noises inside when I knew there was no one in there. I remember my

heart pounding as I walked towards the door. Once I'd opened it and turned on the light, it would be OK. It was just the obstacle of the door that was frightening, not knowing what was behind it. I also remember one night we all walked up the stairs to investigate, holding on to each other's shirts, one in front of the other, in case something bad happened. I could not put into words just how loud those bangs and crashes were, and how it made us feel. We never knew what to expect next.

My friends have also been affected. One of my friends was fascinated by the case and used to ask me about it all the time. He stopped asking me after he found his toilet completely blocked by clothes, which he later found in his U-bend.

We have only received a tiny taste of what Neil has been through. I've seen it with my own eyes, and it's been amazing. When things started happening down the pub it seemed jokey, and acted like one of his mates. I warned Neil he was not their friend, and was just luring them into a false sense of security until the next big thing happened. They were becoming too complacent, and I was very worried about him. When he got attacked in the car I told him enough was enough, and brought him to the priest. You could really see how it was affecting his health; it was taking over his life.

I don't think the priests wanted me present at the exorcism, and I found them to be very judgmental. They were very guarded about the ritual, but I had to be there for Neil in case anything bad happened. I remember feeling like the air had been sucked out of the room, and I was relieved when it was over. We've had some weird things happen since then, but it's nowhere near as bad as it was. Neil seems to be coping well with it now, but I'm always wary, I don't think you can ever fully relax.

Tracey Greenwood

I've known Caroline for several years in my capacity as a police officer. I had noticed that she was not herself long before she told me about the problems in her home. We began working together full time when she mentioned things happening in the pub. I found it fascinating and told her I would be delighted to attend.

At first everything was quiet, but we were having a nice night so it didn't bother me if nothing happened. Neil and Caroline were there, along with Lee and his new girlfriend.

I could not believe my eyes when the pub table began to move by itself. It was small movements first, like vibrations, and then it grew stronger, which was frightening at times. I felt a coldness come over me, although I tried not to get too carried away. I always checked that everyone's hands and feet were away from the table when it moved, and could not see any other explanation for the activity, other than paranormal. At times, it felt as if someone was hitting the top of the table with their fists. We drew a lot of attention as I noticed even the landlord was watching us through his indoor CCTV.

The beeping noises were very strange, and seemed to follow Neil when he went to the toilet, or outside for a cigarette. I remember at one point there was a loud yelling noise as Neil and Lee walked in the door. I thought there was a fight breaking out before I realised there was nobody behind them.

The energy or 'ghost' seemed to have a distinct personality. It could be quite funny with its responses, and was able to do things such as count how many fingers we held behind our backs. It also demonstrated it could become quite angry and agitated. This was shown to us when Mike, the investigator, telephoned and it responded by pinning us against the wall with the table. We

tried to push it away but it would not budge. Minutes later it was free. That night was amazing, and I will remember it for the rest of my life.

Caroline has since kept me updated with the other occurrences in her home. I've listened to several of the voice recordings, and they certainly do not sound human. I had the misfortune of listening to them with headphones, and the growling noises made a shiver run down my spine. It made me feel for Caroline and her family; I cannot imagine what it has been like for them, living with it night and day for the last few years.

I've attended Caroline and Neil's home to witness other things. I have seen a pair of heavy boots walk across her living room floor, and I've heard noises I cannot explain. I know Caroline and her family very well and there is no way they could have made any of this up, and certainly no reason why they would want to. My greatest wish would be for them to find a way to rid themselves of it for good. I am happy to see that things are manageable for them now, and I pray it stays that way.

Paul Brassey

I refer to an incident, which occurred on 25th September 2010. I have worked alongside Caroline and chatted with her during tea breaks. She has always struck me as a genuine person, and I have the same opinion of her husband Neil, whom I've met on social night outs.

I heard she had been having problems with ghostly occurrences in her home, but I've never been what you would call a believer. I mentioned to her that I would be interested in seeing it for myself, but was surprised the day she called me on my mobile phone, asking if I could attend her home. Caroline sounded very distressed, and mentioned there had been fires in the home, and that she was on her way there with another colleague.

I entered the home not long after them, and could see the family was very upset. Neil was mopping up a pool of yellow liquid on the floor, which had a faint smell of urine. My attention was drawn to wet footprints going up the stairs, about three quarter ways up. They were round in shape and did not appear to be caused by a human. I was shocked to see liquid dripping from the direction of the ceiling and hitting the wooden floor below. Upon examination, it became apparent the liquid was not coming from the ceiling, but a couple of inches below it. This meant it was literally coming from thin air. I have no explanation for this, and there is no way this action could have been orchestrated by anyone present. The drips began to move, down the hall, and strangely into the downstairs bathroom, back out again, then towards our heads where it stopped. The pattern of drops could plainly be seen on the floor. After the dripping stopped, a series of bangs and footsteps could be heard upstairs. I was told there was nobody upstairs, and went up to check rooms for myself, which were empty. As we proceeded up the stairs, the

banging noises ceased. When we returned downstairs they started up again.

This occurred several times until Caroline announced she was leaving to stay in Clacton, and the banging noises stopped. I went home to ponder on what I had witnessed. As I said earlier, I have been sceptical of supernatural occurrences in the past, but since that day I now know there is an afterlife. I cannot explain what I have seen any other way.

Stafford

I have never experienced anything like the day I visited Neil and Caroline's home in January 2010. I remember it very clearly. I had just finished my shift when Caroline said Neil had been worried about something going on in the house.

I was curious when she mentioned a ghost, and said I would meet her there. I wasn't really sure what to expect as I walked in the door behind her.

Things happened from the offset and I was shocked to see cups and plates being smashed, a glass of milk being thrown, pictures being moved from the walls and loud noises coming upstairs, as well as the mess it had left behind from a whole day of throwing things around.

Neil looked very shook up, and he told me how he had to run from the house earlier in the day to get the children to safety. I was not surprised. Whatever it was, it was very strong.

I stayed for several hours, but was at a loss at what to advise. Caroline tried looking for help on her computer, but it kept cutting out on her. She tried telephoning for help several times, and the phones stopped working. I remember as she put the phone on speaker and instead of hearing the dialling tone, all we could hear was static. She tried turning her camcorder on, but that stopped working too. I was in the living room talking to Caroline when we heard noises in the hall. We went out to see what was going on, and a plate came flying down the stairs from the upstairs landing. Nobody was touching it as it hit the steps. I picked it up, and was at a loss for words. I had no idea who she could ask for help. All I could do was to tell Caroline I would back her up 100% when it came to telling her story.

I spent about three hours in the house that day, and consider myself very

privileged to have witnessed something so amazing. As I said to Caroline and Neil, it’s certainly given me something to tell the grandkids about some day. Having said that, I was very glad to leave it all behind me when I went home afterwards. I feel sorry for Caroline and her family, who have really been to hell and back these last few years. I hope they get the help they need.

Chris Botragyi

Anyone who has ever encountered, or witnessed a paranormal event in their lives is unique. Most will say on the surface that it was an amazing experience. Yet deep down inside, I defy them to say that they were not unnerved or threatened to some degree by such inconceivable, invisible forces.

If one looks up the definition of the word ‘empathy’ it clearly states in part: ‘The ability to understand and share the feelings of another’. With this statement in mind I truly empathise with Neil, Caroline and their children for the grinding tribulations they have been forced to withstand over the last three years have been nothing short of horrendous.

Having believed in this phenomenon myself, I still find it difficult when trying to comprehend the events that occurred. When you are pitted face to face with such an oppressive, invisible, tornado-like force, it can be hard to get your head around the situation. This is due in part to the magnitude of fear and wonder that accompanies such experiences. Add these to the scientific aspects concerning the properties of sound and gravity, which bewildered us all on numerous occasions and still continues to do so today.

I feel privileged to have witnessed some of these profound, life-altering events from another plane; I know these are extremely rare occurrences, especially at the intense level that was frequently recorded in this case. At the same time I felt constant sadness at the distress that my friend and his family were afflicted with, and sadness that I couldn’t do anything to rid them of the malevolent force that that plagued their lives. I believe that I have gained a deeper insight into the realms of paranormal activity, along with a greater respect for the unknown forces that roam our worldly shores.

People, who like myself, beg for answers to the marvellous mysteries of our universe can at least take a small shot of solace from the fact that some of the phenomena I witnessed quite possibly answered some of my own personal questions and beliefs regarding life – and the grander scheme.

In retrospect, the way I see it is simple. I refer to it as being an entity or force, but in all honesty we have absolutely no idea what it was, or even where it came from. All we do know is that it was intent on causing misery and harm. The way that my friend and his loved ones were intimidated, threatened, and in some cases physically attacked by this unearthly thing, the nature of which was obviously by no means good, suggests that it must have come from some bad preternatural place of origin. If this is the case, then there *has* to be an equal opposite – a preternatural good place must exist. And if it does, surely it has to be something bigger, something better.

Valerie Coughlan

I still think about what Neil, Caroline and kids have been through. It's played on my mind from the start. Every time he calls me, I worry if things are getting bad for him again. God knows it's been a tough few years for them. It's been hard on us too, having to watch things go from bad to worse and not being able to help. All along I would worry he would get seriously hurt, or worse.

It was very hard as we did not know what to make of it. It seemed like a spirit or something much worse, but we couldn't understand what it wanted with Neil. It started off breaking just about everything in the kitchen, and I remember having to move out of the way as a fork flew past my head. Spoons and coins were thrown, and it made such a mess with glass and cups broken on the floor. The knife in the cupboard worried me. I knew there was no way I could allow them to stay in the house that night.

We live in a lovely flat, but it was not made for eight people. The neighbours could hear every time one of the kids jumped around. I know it was hard on them, having to keep quiet all the time. They never complained, even though they had to share one bedroom. I enjoyed their company, although it could get stressful at times, when things got bad for Neil in the house. The fires were very frightening, and sometimes Neil would come home with bad scratches where he had been attacked.

Sometimes it seemed like there would be peace. I found it very strange that it could go for weeks or months, and then come back again.

It was very upsetting watching Neil and Caroline trying to cope with it all, when everyone seemed against them. We spoke to the priests so many times, but it seemed to take forever to get help. Lots of different people came and

went to the house in the meantime, but nothing really changed until the exorcism.

I was not happy about Neil and his friends carrying it on when they went out. I know it wasn’t their fault, but it made me feel very uncomfortable. Ben (my husband), did not want to talk about it at all, although he did the best he could, speaking with the priest as often as he was able. I’m glad things have died down. Sometimes when I go to sleep at night I think about it, and the worry all comes flooding back again. As a mother you never stop worrying about your children, but I can’t imagine too many mothers have the same worries as I do.

John F. Triplow

When my colleague Mike Hallowell invited me to investigate the bizarre occurrences in Neil and Caroline's home, I jumped at the opportunity to study a case which – even at first glance – had the potential to outdo the South Shields Poltergeist's reign of terror in 2006. At that time, I was a relative newcomer to the world of preternatural research. Next to my colleague's forty-odd years researching the unknown, I admit that I was a wet-behind-the-ears investigator with very little idea about what I was letting myself in for.

For the best part of my thirty years on this planet I was brought up to believe that ghosts are the spirits of the dead – disembodied incarnations of our former human-selves – bound by motives prerequisite to their eternal rest, thus compelling them to walk the earth until their otherworldly missions are complete. I once adhered to the theory that poltergeist phenomena was a force born out of an overload of stress and negativity within a person, which when released produces a series of frightening 'haunted house-like' effects whenever the host or 'focus' is around. This case changed that. This case changed everything I once believed – or, more accurately, what I was comfortable to believe. Just like the crockery the entity shattered in Neil and Caroline's home, this case shook my beliefs to their core. It literally smashed them to smithereens – and it's only now, over three years on, that I'm beginning to pick up the pieces.

During our research for this case, Mike and I were astonished to discover that the phenomena in Neil and Caroline's home was synonymous with a malign and extremely dangerous elemental-type creature from English folklore called a brag. The name 'brag' originates from the northern-counties,

but the phenomenon itself is global – every culture around the world has different names for these creatures, and that breaks down further depending on the country and their colloquial languages. Moreover, we discovered that there was a cluster of paranormal researchers within the field coming around to the idea that all paranormal phenomena stems from a race of supernatural creatures which – for the most part – are hidden from our sensory perception, and who have the ability to appear in human and animal forms, not unlike what was witnessed in this case.

Although the family didn't always see eye-to-eye with us regarding our theories, one thing we did all agree was that this thing was not human, and it never had been. I'll leave you, the readers, to make up your own minds about what this thing was – is. I say is because, at the time of writing this piece, Mike and I have had several strange voicemails and text messages left on our phones; I've had paperwork removed from my pocket at work, and stuffed into a trolley door in the matter of a split-second; and an empty teacup moved the full length of a windowsill while my back was turned less than two minutes ago. I often wonder if it will ever end – hopefully one day it will.

I have no doubt that the sceptics will be loading bullets into their proverbial pistols as they read this very sentence. But, you know what? I don't care. I know what I saw in that house, and no matter what anyone says they will never be able to convince me otherwise. Like Mike says: “They weren't there. And so they don't know”. It really is as simple as that.

John F. Triplow
Freelance writer and paranormal investigator.
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Lee Lough-Atkins

I could not believe my eyes the day I visited my friend Neil's house. I have known him for several years now and to this day I do not understand how this paranormal entity has attached itself to Neil and his family. This was the most unusual and dramatic day of my life. I was before a sceptic to the paranormal world, but from that day my views have most definitely changed. I saw so much happen that day, from as little as car keys moving to horrific threatening phone calls and growls within Neil's home. This was very disturbing and frightening for Neil and myself. When these occurrences kept happening, Neil and his family would have to move out of their home and stay with relatives. This entity was very powerful and strong and could be noticed outside Neil's home as well as inside.

These occurrences would stop from time to time or be very mild, which was a relief for Neil and his family. It was at its strongest when Neil and I were together in the house or outside. We have never understood why. I was very on edge at these times as we did not know what the entity was capable of. As time went on things became really frightening and disturbing for Neil, Neil's family and myself. Neil got in contact with Mike Hallowell for help and answers. The first time we met Mike and his team we warmed to them and they were comforting when the bizarre occurrences were going on. Mike made many visits since then and has seen many unusual happenings within Neil's home. We have had many witnesses to this case, and Neil and myself are trying to come to terms with it all.

From this day we still have no answers. Although being able to move on from this would be beneficial for Neil's family and myself, we both feel there is still so much more to learn and grasp from this matter. We realise we might

have to come to terms with never finding the answers we need to these frightening and strange happenings.

As from the very first day I have become very open minded and my views towards the paranormal world have changed. This has opened my eyes to things I could never imagine witnessing.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Caroline lives with her husband, four children and two dogs in a pretty village on the coast of Essex.

Her search for answers continues. If you are interested in finding out more please visit her website.

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